スレイヤーズすぺしゃる❷

リトル・プリンセス

神坂 一

イラスト あらいずみるい

富士見ファンタジア文庫

Slayers Special Volume 2

Little Princess

By Hajime Kanazaka

Machine Translated and Edited by
Eff_Efferson
(March 2026)

For more: visit
tenchimuyotranslationblog.blogspot.com

The White Dragon Mountain

"I perceive you to be—a sorcerer."

An old man called out to me in a tiny village. It happened while I was sipping a stew set for dinner in the drafty dining room of the only dilapidated inn in town. Perhaps travelers' tracks grew sparse during this bitterly cold season, as there were no other guests besides us. I raised my gaze to look at the old man. His face, etched with dignity by time, was heavily shadowed with an air of deep distress.

"To tell you the truth... there is something I would like to ask of you, if I may..."

"No."

I replied quite flatly. The old man remained standing in silence. A brief quiet followed—or rather, only the sound of me slurping my stew and the eerie moans leaking from the second floor of the inn drifted through the air.

"...No... um, could you at least hear me out, if possible...?"

Reluctantly, I lifted my face from the stew bowl again.

"Well, fine... if it's just listening."

"Actually... in the snowy mountains to the east of the village..."

"Absolutely not."

I refused him point-blank. Another brief silence followed.

"...Um... may I ask why you are dissatisfied? If you wouldn't mind telling me the reason?"

"Because it's cold."

The old man's eyes went blank at my blunt declaration. Even I, Lina Inverse—a warrior and sorcerer of world-renowned (albeit infamous) reputation—was a child of man after all. There were one or two things in this world I just couldn't handle. One of them was this thing called "the cold." I had crossed the mountain path to the east to reach this village, and the cold back then was unbelievable! I had almost wanted to scream, "Argh!

Why is it so cold!?" while firing off Fireballs at random. Well, I actually did it, though.

To ward off the summer heat, sorcerers were taught a very weak chilling spell first upon joining the Sorcerer’s Guild. They would occasionally cast this secretly under their capes to stay cool. However, on the other hand, a weak warming spell for winter use simply did not exist. There were two reasons for this. First, it wasn't normally necessary. A sorcerer’s original purpose was the pursuit of "something." Their duty as members of the Sorcerer’s Guild was to shut themselves away in some tower or basement and spend their days obsessively researching magical literature. If it got cold, they could just warm the room or dress warmly. Then, the second reason: warmth belongs to the "Fire" elemental, and "Fire," as the word "blaze" implies, possesses an inherently violent nature—or rather, characteristic. To put it simply, fine-tuning the amount of heat was so difficult it was practically impossible.

But—the other day, there were two sorcerers who challenged that difficulty. One was myself, and the other was an acquaintance of mine (sort of), a woman named Naga the White Serpent. She was a female sorcerer who looked like a total villain and wore a costume that looked pointlessly cold. Claiming to be my rival, she followed me around like a goldfish's droppings, saying things like, "Ho-ho-ho, one of these days I shall certainly settle things with you!" However, that outfit must have made the cold pierce her to the bone. Ignoring my advice to just wear proper clothes, she suggested we perform control experiments with warming spells on the way to this village. Maybe she just didn't have enough money on hand to buy decent clothes. Anyway, I was also in the wrong for going along with it. After all, her magical power was immense, but her ability to control it was non-existent; she was an utterly meddlesome sorcerer.

Sure enough—while saying things like "I'll adjust the heat by combining the powers of fire and ice perfectly!" she let a chilling spell run wild and completely froze an entire lake, or conversely, burned a whole forest to the ground. In the end, she suddenly turned into a human fireball. Wow, I was shocked. I found myself clapping. (Heartless, I know.) So, the eerie groans from the second floor were actually her recuperating. Though, I also did something a bit "playful"—saying "I'll just warm the air around me. Heh. I'm so smart!" and blasting Fireballs all over the place, which caused a massive avalanche that nearly swallowed me whole (I thought I was going to die then), so I suppose I didn't have much right to laugh at others...

Anyway, for now, I wasn't exactly short on travel funds, and I had to look after the bedridden Naga (a cursed bond, truly). That being the case, what joy could I possibly find in going out of my way to a freezing snowy mountain!? The old man stared at me with a stunned expression for a while, but eventually gave a heavy sigh, as if giving up.

"I see... so you won't accept...?"

"Nope."

I nodded simply.

"It can't be helped... well, it's only natural... the opponent is a White Dragon. It is a bit too strong a foe..."

—A White Dragon!?

Twitch!

"...Heh... heh heh..."

With a *clatter*, I kicked over my chair and stood up slowly. As it happened, I had a connection with White Dragons that was by no means shallow. Yes—on that distant day in my childhood. The day I first saw a White Dragon soaring majestically through the sky, and I chased after it for miles—only to trip and sprain my ankle, and drop all the snacks I'd spent my allowance on down a cliff—

Damn you, White Dragon! You shall not be forgiven! Even as a young child back then, I had instinctively raised my middle finger toward the receding form of the White Dragon... Who was that!? Who just whispered, "That's a total misplaced grudge"!? I won't say you're wrong... but still, if the opponent was a White Dragon, that was a different story!

"Let me hear the details! That story!"

According to the old man—or rather, the village chief—this was the situation. It was around the end of last year when a single White Dragon settled in the snowy mountains to the east of the village. The presence of a dragon was certainly a psychological threat, but since it didn't seem to be messing with the village, they had ignored it, fearing that provoked it would lead to disaster. However, just a few days ago, it apparently started causing trouble. While there were no casualties among people or livestock yet, it was likely only a matter of time. So, after a village meeting, they decided to "kill or be killed" and started looking for mercenaries. But this was a desolate, cold village with little foot traffic; a strong warrior wasn't going to be found so conveniently. That was when the innkeeper remembered the wise-looking, beautiful girl in sorcerer's attire (basically me) who had been staying there for a few days.

Whoooooosh...

In the middle of the whistling north wind, I stood alone, at a total loss. Though a light dusting of snow covered the area, the mountain sky was blue and cloudless, as if

transparent. The cold, crisp scent of snow filled the air. Even at high noon, it was freezing. The guy who guided me this far must have been terrified of the dragon; he just blurted out, "It's around here! Where the dragon appears! Goodbye!" and hurried back down the mountain. Since then, I had been wandering in search of the dragon... but thinking about it now: the hazy mountain peaks, the endless dense trees... what exactly did "around here" mean!? To be clear, a White Dragon was no match for me! I had defeated more than a dozen Blue Dragons, which were stronger than White ones, and I had even taken down a Black Dragon that would make even first-class warriors flee in terror. But if I didn't even know where the dragon was, its strength was a moot point. For a moment, I thought about going back to the village to get the guide again, but it’s not like he’d know the dragon’s exact location anyway...

Still, standing around being lost wouldn't solve anything. On the other hand, if I wandered aimlessly and got stranded, I’d be the laughingstock for generations. In times like these, the best thing to do was eat my lunch early. Yes. Screaming meaninglessly toward the distant mountains was another option; it might relieve stress, but it wouldn't solve any problems, so I put that on hold. Now, the problem was where to have lunch... and then—

Mountain birds took flight nearby. This was followed by sounds like wood shaking or scratching—*crack, rustle, scrape.* ...Huh... Reluctantly, I stood up and approached the source of the noise, muffling my footsteps. I rounded a small grove and peeked out from behind a tree toward the sound—and oh, no!

A White Dragon was right there. It must have been gnawing on tree bark or something, because its gaze, which happened to be directed my way, met mine—even though I had intended to peek secretly—straight on. At this distance, the opponent had the advantage. A slight tension ran through my body. The white dragon opened its mouth. From it leaked the somewhat faltering words of a human.

'Yo! You alone, little miss? How about coming over here and gnawing on some bark with me?'

My fighting spirit vanished into mist in an instant.

'That’s terrible... talk about a false accusation.'

The White Dragon, who introduced himself as Lyos, made a *tsk-tsk-tsk* sound, skillfully waving a claw on his wing. I sat down on a flat stone next to him as he sat perched on the ground, and listened to his story.

"So, you haven't done anything?"

I asked in human speech. It was a huge help that he could speak the human language. I could speak the dragon tongue, but the pronunciation was notoriously difficult. One syllable off and the meaning changed entirely; a slight mistake could result in total nonsense or even the opposite meaning.

'Of course not. ...Anyway, what exactly is this "trouble" I'm supposed to be causing?'

I was stumped when he asked that. Come to think of it, the village chief said the dragon had "started causing trouble," but I hadn't asked for specifics.

"Well... the village chief was vague about it, but it seems things have gotten pretty bad."

I threw out a guess for now.

"But... not that I doubt you, but it’s definitely not you, right?"

'Of course it isn't.'

The dragon puffed out his chest proudly.

'I swear by the Red Dragon God, absolutely not. ...In the first place, if I messed with the humans nearby, it’s obvious they’d eventually retaliate. That wouldn't lead to anything fun, at the very least. Even a dragon hatchling could understand that logic... well, except for Blue Dragons. Those guys are big, but they've got nothing upstairs.'

He let out a loud, mocking laugh. It seemed racial (?) prejudice existed in the dragon world too. Well, since they were living creatures, I guess that couldn't be helped.

'...Wait a sec—speaking of Blue Dragons...'

He suddenly stopped laughing and took on a suspicious expression.

'For a little while now, I’ve been spotting a Blue Dragon around here quite often. I thought he might be encroaching on my territory, but I figured it’d be a waste to get hurt by getting involved with an idiot... so I ignored him. But thinking about it now, maybe he’s...'

"The true culprit, you mean."

'Yeah, probably.'

Lyos nodded firmly. I see, that wasn't an impossible story. He managed to scrape by until autumn when food was plentiful, but once the snow started falling, he couldn't find enough to eat. So, he set his sights on this area where many evergreens grew—that was likely how it went. Many people in the world had the image that dragons lived only on meat, but they were actually omnivores, just like humans.

"In other words, that Blue Dragon intentionally caused trouble in the village, planning to pin the blame on you from the start."

'Yeah. Blue Dragons are strangely cunning.'

...That was different from what he said earlier. This guy really had a grudge against Blue Dragons.

"Well, I've got the gist of it now. Alright! Then I'll lend a hand! Come down the mountain with me and talk to the villagers. —It'll be fine, really. I'll mediate, and I'm sure the villagers' misunderstanding will be cleared up."

I thumped my chest.

'...It'll be okay, right... really...?'

He looked at my face with uneasy, narrowed eyes.

"Just leave it to me!"

"...And so, this guy is saying this kind of ridiculous nonsense, but what do you all think?"

I said to the lined-up villagers while patting the back of Lyos, whose tail, mouth, limbs, and wings I had tied up tightly with magic-enhanced wire.

"That's obviously a lie!"

"We haven't seen any blue dragon at all!"

"Yeah, yeah! Just beat him down!"

"It must have been him!"

The villagers shouted one after another. I turned to the tied-up Lyos and whispered in a small voice.

"Yeah... looks like persuasion is impossible after all. Well, you just have to accept this as fate and give up. Ha ha ha ha."

The dragon seemed to be mumbling something, but since his mouth was tied shut to prevent him from using his breath, it only sounded like a groan. Then—

"Oh, another big bird over there!"

A young child's voice cried out. Sensing what that meant, I looked in that direction, and sure enough—at the edge of the snow-covered mountains, a large Blue Dragon was soaring majestically with its wings spread.

"It’s a dragon..."

"He’s huge."

The villagers buzzed with excitement.

"See! It’s just like this dragon said!"

I said, gaining momentum.

"You really should trust what people say!"

"...But even you didn't look like you trusted that dragon..."

"That’s just your imagination."

Lightly brushing off Villager A’s quite accurate retort, I released the White Dragon’s bonds. ...Tch. What a lucky guy. (I sounded like a villain there...)

'...Hey you... that treatment was too much, no matter how you look at it.'

Lyos muttered in the dragon tongue, likely worried about the villagers overhearing. He seemed quite dissatisfied that I had suddenly put him to sleep with a Sleep spell, tied him up so he couldn't move, and dragged him before the villagers. ...Well, that was only natural.

"Gripes later! For now, just follow that Blue Dragon!"

As I said this, I hopped nimbly onto the White Dragon’s back. I gave a sharp finger signal to the stunned villagers.

"Please wait! I will definitely take down the true culprit! Me—and this White Dragon here!"

And then—the white dragon flapped his wings into the wide sky!

"Good luck!"

"Don’t lose! Crush that blue dragon!"

The villagers shouted encouragement as they looked up at us.

"How opportunistic... as soon as they realized what you said was true, they turned like that."

At my comment, Lyos shot me a momentary sideways glare.

'I feel like you’re plenty opportunistic yourself...'

"Wha... what are you talking about!? I believed you from the very beginning!"

'It certainly didn't look that way.'

Ugh...

"Setting that aside! Chasing the Blue Dragon is the priority right now!"

'...You always try to gloss over things like that... that's why humans are...'

I pretended not to hear Lyos's quiet mutterings. The Blue Dragon eventually lowered its altitude and changed course toward a densely forested area.

"Try to catch up!"

'I'll try!'

Lyos's speed surged, and the gap between us and the Blue Dragon closed in the blink of an eye. He truly lived up to being a White Dragon, boasting the fastest flight speed among the dragon race (excluding wyverns, of course).

'But... even if we catch up to him, I assume you've thought of a way to take him down.'

I gave Lyos a blank stare.

"What are you talking about? You're the one who's going to take him down."

Jolt.

The White Dragon's posture faltered significantly in mid-air for a second.

'Wa—wait a minute! Why do I have to fight a guy like that!?'

"What are you talking about!? You're the one the villagers suspect! If you don't fight, who will!?"

'...Well, I guess so, but... don't be unreasonable! My specialty is intellectual labor! Why do I have to pick a fight with a Blue Dragon that's all power!?'

"...Well, I guess 'this is fate' too."

'Don't be so irresponsible! There's no way I can win!'

"Why are you being such a coward from the start!? With love and friendship, effort and guts, plus luck and skill, technique and speed, and if you have intelligence, magic, wealth, and power, there's no opponent in this world you can't beat! Now, go for it!"

'Well, if you have all that, you'd be invincible! But no matter how hard I try, I can only get

about two of those!'

"...I've been listening quietly, and all you've been doing is whining like a coward..."

'You haven't been quiet at all!'

"Argh! Shut up! You're a full-grown dragon, so stop saying such weak things! ...Listen, there are three things in this world that I hate."

'...What? All of a sudden...'

"Just listen. First is a damp, humid summer night. Second is someone who causes trouble for others but acts like nothing happened. ...Oh, right, I also hate the smell of rotting zombies, and I can't stand people who act all high and mighty by relying on authority or someone else's power! Men who treat women like tools deserve ten thousand deaths, but on the other hand, I hate women who over-rely on the fact that they are women... And! I hate people like you who give up and decide they can't do it before they even try!"

'...Weren't there about seven things just now?'

"Argh! Shut up! I also hate people who nitpick every little detail!"

'...The eighth...'

"Anyway! Just try your best! I'll help as much as I can!"

'Whatever... it looks like turning back in silence isn't an option anymore...'

Lyos said in a bitter voice. The Blue Dragon had noticed us.

The two dragons faced off over the white-stained earth.

'What is it, you? You're that White Dragon brat who lives around here, aren't you?'

The blue dragon said. —Of course, there were no words like "you" or "brat" in the dragon tongue, but based on the atmosphere the Blue Dragon projected, that's how it would translate into human speech. He was a vulgar speaker. Well, Lyos's speech wasn't exactly polite either. The Golden Dragon I met before was so excessively courteous.

'You want something? ...Tch... don't suddenly stop me and act tough by glaring at me. Say something, eh!?'

...At the risk of being repetitive, among dragons, "acting tough by glaring" (as above).

Faced with a Blue Dragon that was two sizes taller and nearly twice the volume, Lyos

was likely genuinely terrified; he just stood there without a word.

"What are you getting cold feet for!?"

I said in human speech while still on Lyos's back.

"Say something back! Overpower him with words first and gain the psychological upper hand! That should be easy enough, shouldn't it!? You said yourself that Blue Dragons have pudding for brains instead of a mind!"

'What!?'

The Blue Dragon was the first to react to my words. —Ah, wait, did the Blue Dragon understand human speech too...? He glared straight at Lyos with a fierce look.

'You... you said that...? Pudding for a brain!? That's a real funny thing to say, eh!?'

'I didn't go that far!'

'Shut up! I don't care if it was your line or that of the scruffy human brat on your back!'

Twitch!

Sc... scruffy brat...

Snap!

"...Lyos..."

I whispered softly into the White Dragon's ear.

'What is it?'

"I'll back you up."

I began chanting a spell. The Blue Dragon looked bored.

'...Hmph! What are you mumbling for! If you have a complaint, come at me—'

"Shut up! Dragon Slave!"

BOOM!

Along with my spell, the ground behind the Blue Dragon shattered.

Silence...

The two dragons were frozen stiff. It was only natural. No matter how much of a dragon they were, if they took a hit from a spell like that, they wouldn't stand a chance.

"Heh... heh heh heh heh heh..."

I let out a low laugh on the White Dragon’s back.

'I missed on purpose just now.'

Raising my middle finger, I shouted at the Blue Dragon in the dragon tongue.

'If you don't run as hard as you can, I'll hit you next time.'

'Wa... wait a minute! What kind of personality do you have!?'

The Blue Dragon flapped his wings in a panic.

"Be quiet! Now fly, Lyos! Hurry up and follow him!"

'...Um, well...'

"If you keep complaining, I’ll blast a Fireball into your back!"

'Eep... eeeeeek!'

In a rush, Lyos also flapped his wings. And thus, the pursuit began.

"Heh heh heh heh heh heh."

I unleashed one spell after another from the White Dragon’s back. Dragon Slaves exploded indiscriminately all over the snow-covered mountains.

'P... please, if possible, I’d like you to stop that "chuckling on my back"... it’s really scary...'

Lyos said. His speech toward me had become very polite. ...He must have been really terrified by that Dragon Slave earlier.

"Don't worry about it."

I brushed it off. —Just to be clear so there’s no misunderstanding, I didn't intend to torture the Blue Dragon to death. The point was to scare him thoroughly and then drive him away so he would never come near here again and never cause trouble for humans; I just had to give him some psychological trauma.

"Heh heh heh heh heh heh."

Thump! Thump! BOOM!

...I was definitely not doing this just for fun! Please believe me.

The pursuit by the two dragons continued. They crossed forests, passed over peaks,

and soared down mountain slopes, kicking up snow clouds.

'Wa... wait a minute!'

Lyos shouted.

"...What?"

'If possible... um... I'd like you to hold back on the spells a bit...'

"Why? It's not like it's causing any trouble..."

'But... the shape of the mountain is changing.'

Oh, you're right.

"Come to think of it, my big sister back home also said... we should treasure nature."

'.....'

"—But then again, there's a saying that 'some sacrifices are unavoidable'..."

'Waaaah! Don't mess up my territory any more than this!'

"...Even so, if we let him escape halfway, his defiance will override his fear, and he'll come back for a revenge match after a while."

'—I get it—'

After thinking for a moment, Lyos said in a determined tone.

'I'll take him down. So—absolutely do not interfere.'

"Blue Dragon over there! Stop!"

At my voice, the Blue Dragon stopped moving and hovered. He was quite obedient.

"The situation has changed. You're going to have a duel with this White Dragon, so be ready."

'What? ...With him?'

The Blue Dragon narrowed his eyes. If a White Dragon and a Blue Dragon fought head-on, the White Dragon would naturally be at a disadvantage. But since Lyos had said it so clearly, I had to step back.

'If I beat this White Dragon, you'll let me go quietly.'

"Yes. Also, if you swear never to harm humans, you can live in this area as your

territory."

With that, I used Raywing to float down from Lyos's back and landed on a peak with a good view. ...Well, that was the condition Lyos had set... but I wondered if he was really going to be okay...

"The location is within the range I can see from here, and there are no other rules whatsoever..."

I glanced at Lyos. He nodded deeply. He could do it when it counted. You're a real man!

"GO!"

At my signal, the two dragons cut through the wind.

CRASH!

With a flashy sound, the two dragons collided. Having taken damage from that just now, Lyos flew toward me weakly. In a small voice, he said:

'...Actually, I want to stop this... this kind of barbaric thing... is that okay...?'

Y... you... you jerk...

"Why are you giving up already!? Listen! If you try to run, I'll blow you away!"

'Hieeeeee...'

Don't make such a pathetic noise! ...I feel like a fool for being impressed for even a second...

'No advice allowed!'

The Blue Dragon shouted as he charged. He killed his speed, took a deep breath—hey, wait! A dragon's breath right off the bat! Lyos dodged in a panic.

"Burst Rondo!"

Just in front of my outstretched palm, the fire the dragon breathed split neatly to the left and right. It was an application of the Fire Wall technique, interfering with the incoming fire's magic and scattering it in other directions.

"Violence against the witness is punishable by ten thousand deaths! Be careful from now on!"

'Y... yes!'

The Blue Dragon replied with a twitching face. It was hard to say he turned pale,

though.

Whether his damage hadn't recovered yet, Lyos was still flying weakly. Wanting to buy time for recovery, he continued flying toward a distant valley.

'You bastard! I won't let you escape!'

The Blue Dragon pursued at high speed. The gap between the two narrowed rapidly. Lyos glanced back, saw the Blue Dragon, and screamed.

'Waaaaah!'

Lyos was now within the range of the Blue Dragon’s breath. Although, if he breathed fire at this flight speed, the Blue Dragon himself would be covered in flames due to wind pressure. Even the Blue Dragon wasn't that stupid. Instead, he snapped his teeth together, threatening Lyos from behind.

'Stop it! Don't bite my tail!'

...Idiot. You shouldn't have said that. Sure enough, the Blue Dragon found it amusing and tried to bite Lyos’s tail. Lyos swung his tail at the last second to dodge.

'Hey! Stop it! I told you to stop! ...Psych!'

Oh! Lyos suddenly performed a loop-de-loop. The Blue Dragon, who had been playing around by nipping at the tip of the tail, was a moment late in responding to Lyos’s movement. The match was decided in that instant. The claws of the inverted Lyos tore through both of the Blue Dragon’s wings!

The Blue Dragon took direct damage to his wings and fell into a deep valley in a tailspin. Even for a dragon, it wasn't a depth one could survive falling into. I see, he was quite capable. Lyos’s cry of "Don't bite my tail!" was a psychological tactic to draw the Blue Dragon’s attention to his tail.

"You did great!"

I sent a big wink to Lyos.

When we returned to the village, Lyos became an instant hero. The villagers even held a banquet for me and the white dragon that day. Since he could speak human language, I was sure he would get along well with the villagers from now on. He was already fully integrated with the villagers, being offered sake by a drunken middle-aged man. Good, good. I was drinking juice while watching them.

'...No, really, it’s fine.'

"No, no, I was really in the wrong. To think I suspected a good dragon like you... especially since all the incidents were related to snow. The lake at the water source freezing over, avalanches... that’s why. I should have realized it when it didn't involve forest fires."

Pffft!

I accidentally sprayed my juice. The eyes of the villagers and Lyos gathered on me. Forest fires... frozen lakes... major avalanches...

Co... could they all have been the work of me and Naga!?

"A... ha ha... no, it’s nothing. It’s absolutely nothing."

I hurriedly waved my hands at everyone. ...Then that Blue Dragon was just a passerby!? ...For now, I’ll keep this tucked away deep in my heart. Needless to say, as soon as Naga’s wounds healed, we left the village as if we were running away. I felt a little bit of regret.

Moral: Make sure to check things properly and think carefully before you act.

(The White Dragon Mountain: End)

Little Princess

Crash!
The table made an incredibly flashy sound as it blew away along with the food on top of it, immediately after I reflexively leaped from my chair. It wasn't exactly an attack. Someone had come charging in head-first.
...Dammit, and here I was, actually spending a rare, girlie, serene afternoon at an outdoor restaurant...
"Ouch, ouch, ouch..."
The culprit behind the destruction picked herself up while covered in food. She was a petite girl with blonde hair. Her age seemed about the same as mine. Our heights were neck-and-neck too. Somehow, she gave off an air of refinement. In a few years, she would probably turn into quite a lady. As soon as she raised her face, she suddenly lunged forward and clung to my waist!
"Save me! Big sister!"
I instinctively clutched my head. Jobs that didn't pay usually started with this exact pattern. If that was the case, then as per the pattern...
"—Hand over that girl, will you?"
"There they are..."
The man, accompanied by henchmen who looked every bit like minor thugs, looked at me with a suspicious face.
"What do you mean, 'there they are'?"
"...Ah, nothing, nothing..."
I waved my hands dismissively. By his appearance, he looked like a bounty hunter or perhaps a lone-wolf bandit. This guy alone seemed somewhat capable compared to the others, but unfortunately for him, it was ten years too early for him to face Lina Inverse, warrior and sorcerer! At any rate, in this situation, there was only one course of action for me to take!
Kick!
I deliberately delivered a kick to the girl! Stomp, stomp!
"Argh! You flip over my table out of nowhere and then ask me to 'save you'!? Don't take the world so lightly!"
"Pyaaa! Pyaaa!"
The pursuers watched the turn of events with stunned expressions.
"...Um... in this case, I thought the theory was that you're supposed to save her..."
The man muttered in a somewhat apologetic voice.

"Shut up! It's none of your business!"
When the pattern was forced on me like that, it was only human nature to want to break it at all costs. Some might call it "being contrary."
"...No, that’s true, but when you act like that, it makes it hard for us to know how to react..."
I glared at the man with cold eyes, let out a small snort, and muttered under my breath.
"—Ah, no, I’m not exactly complaining. As long as you hand over the girl, that's fine by us..."
Seeing that I was in a foul mood, he suddenly spoke quite apologetically.
...Maybe this guy was actually faint-hearted. Regardless—
"Fire Arrow!"
I released the spell I had finished chanting in my mouth right at their feet.
"Dwowowowowowowowowawa!"
Caught completely off guard, the men were beyond surprised.
"Now! While we have the chance!"
I grabbed the hand of the girl at my feet, leaped over the hedge of the garden restaurant, and started running at full tilt.
"If that spell just now hadn't missed, it would have been settled!"
She said in a reproachful voice.
"Don't be ridiculous! I didn't miss, I aimed away!"
"Why!?"
"I wanted to change locations!"
"Was that place no good!?"
"If we do it that way, we can get out of paying the bill in all the confusion!"
"....."
Understandably, she didn't say anything more after that.
"...Finally... caught up... little miss..."
The man squeezed the words out while gasping for breath. He hadn't caught up. I had let him catch up. This was a vacant lot a bit away from the residential area. Poorly grown weeds covered the ground, and short shrubs grew sparsely. Here, even if things got a bit rowdy, it wouldn't bother anyone not involved. The leader took several deep breaths before opening his mouth.
"Listen, I'll say this only once more. If you don't want to see a world of pain..."
"Dill Brand!"
Boom!
—Thus, the battle ended.
"...That was so blunt..."
She muttered, stunned. I let out a long breath.

"I don't know why those guys were chasing you, but it would be smarter to just tell an official or someone and get help."
"—Wait!"
Her voice hit my back as I tried to walk away. I looked over my shoulder to find her blue eyes right in front of me. With deep distress gathered in their depths, she spoke.
"Please... won't you lend me your strength?"
"No."
.....
After a brief silence as she looked off into the distance, she took something small wrapped in oil paper out of the pack at her waist.
"Heh heh heh, then how about this!!"
I opened what she handed me—something about the size of a baby's fist—and—
"—This is!?"
It was a single large emerald. If one used sorcery, creating something like this was no trouble at all. Everything circulating in the world as "jewel talismans" was of that sort. But—this—this was the pure, natural thing! And the purity and polish were flawless!
"...To think you possess something like this..."
I stared intently at her face once more.
"Yes... I am..."
She lowered her eyes for a moment, and eventually spoke in a quiet tone.
"—My name is Lamia. I am the only daughter of the great merchant Marius—"
I was speechless. The great merchant Marius—Marius Lindbergh. He started with nothing and now led hundreds of trading merchants; he was the greatest merchant in this region—the Coastal Kingdoms. Certainly, it wouldn't be strange if jewels like this were rolling around his place, but why would his only daughter—
"Is—"
I asked in a raspy voice, my throat clicking as I swallowed.
"Is it true...?"
"It's obviously a lie. Are you stupid?"
—I kicked her over without hesitation.
"W... Wait a minute! I'll tell you the truth!"
"Shut up."
Ignoring her as she continued to follow me, I walked briskly away.
"I am..."
She ran with pitter-patter steps, got around in front of me, and declared with dignity.
"I am Lamia Ul Turadia. I am the daughter of Duke Turadia, who is entrusted with the domain of Tyrell City by the King of Raltigue."
"Liar."

I cut her off flatly with a single word and walked past her.
"...No, um..."
After a moment of being frozen, she hurriedly followed again. She dangled a pendant with some sort of crest in front of my eyes.
"This time it's really, really true. Look, look. The crest on this pendant! Oh! It's real! See, it was real! ...Believe me already!"
"Hmm."
I stopped walking and stared intently at the crest. It was exquisite goldwork that brought to mind the brilliance of its maker, depicting the crest of a horned leopard, a stylized shield, and something like a white bird. The horned leopard indicated the territory of the Rarligue Dutchy, the shield obviously represented protection, and in this country, the white bird was considered the beast that ruled the East. In other words, it indicated the lord of Tyrell, a key point in the eastern defense of the Dutchy's territory; it was unmistakably the real thing.
"—So,"
I asked in a bright voice.
"Where did you pick this up?"
"Dohhh, please, just believe me!"
She sounded like she was about to cry.
...I guess it couldn't be helped. It wouldn't be fun if I teased her too much and she held a grudge...
"...This crest is certainly the real thing."
"Right? Right?"
Her face brightened, and she hopped around like a child.
"Alright, alright, I believe you. That you're the daughter of Duke Turadia."
"Thank you! Big sister!"
Saying that, she suddenly lunged and hugged me again.
...I hope I'm wrong, but this girl doesn't have "that" kind of leaning, does she...?
Apparently, there were unsettling movements within the domain. She had heard the rumors just as she was about to head home after finishing two years of dormitory life at the White Magic City. The previous lord—her grandfather—had suddenly collapsed from illness, and her father, who was next in line to be lord, was governing in haste. It was a rule passed down through the Turadia family to hold the coronation ceremony only when all family members were gathered. Naturally, until Lamia returned, the seat of the formal lord remained vacant...
It seemed someone was trying to take advantage of that. Perhaps to obstruct her movements and scheme for the succession in the meantime... or to take her life as leverage to make her father step down... As soon as that message reached her from the message center operated by the Sorcerer's Guild, she set out on her journey. The

message said they would send guards, but she couldn't afford to wait that long, and she reasoned that moving alone would be better for deceiving the enemy's eyes. This judgment was correct. If I were the mastermind behind that evil scheme, I would undoubtedly slip an assassin among those guards. Scratching the back of my neck, I finished listening to her story and involuntarily muttered a single thought.
"...What a cliché story..."
"Eh? Did you just say something...?"
"No, no, nothing at all. Anyway, so you've made it this far safely, but you were finally noticed by those guys hired by whoever is plotting... I guess?"
"That’s right. ...And here I thought I’d deceived them well..."
She said regretfully.
"...But still..."
I said while pressing my head, which had begun to ache.
"When things come at me in such a pattern, I can tell what the enemy's next move will be..."
Namely: Hiring a sorcerer to counter me.
Zan!
The treetops of the forest rustled.
"A bird?"
Lamia, standing behind me, instinctively looked up.
"No,"
I said, without taking my eyes off the man standing in front of me with a smirk on his face. In the corner of my vision, a black shadow darted through the sunlight filtering through the trees—it was definitely not a bird.
"Exactly. It’s not a bird."
The man spoke as if trying to drill it into us. He was the leader of the third-rate villains who had been chasing her the day I met Lamia. Whether by luck or misfortune, the damage from my spell hadn't been much, and he had already fully recovered.
"I hired help. And this time, they’re a cut above those thugs from before. —Yes, a sorcerer just like you!"
As soon as he said it, a presence landed behind us!
"Ho-ho-ho-ho! I have no grudge against you, but this is the law of the jungle! Take pride in perishing at the hands of the greatest sorceress of the century, Naga the White Serpent... Wait, isn't that Lina? What's wrong? Falling down all of a sudden..."
L-l-listen, you...
I squeezed out every bit of my willpower and somehow managed to recover. Despite the somewhat chilly season, she wore her usual, needlessly and pointlessly high-exposure "evil female sorceress" costume. Claiming to be my greatest and

strongest rival in life, she had challenged me several times, only to self-destruct every single time; she was quite a troublesome woman. Lately, while calling herself my rival, she had been following me around like a duckling (...not that she was that cute), making me pay for her meals, or swiping fruit from storefronts and, when caught by officials, saying things like, "My guardian's name is Lina Inverse" (you're older than me, dammit). She was utterly uncontrollable.
...Of course, she insisted on calling this a "psychological attack." Just the other day, when I teased her mercilessly, saying, "You just don't have any money," she had disappeared, saying she would "go get some travel funds"... Seeing her doing this kind of thing in a place like this, did she really have no travel funds?
"D... Do you know each other? You two?"
The assassin was stunned. Ignoring him, I continued talking to Naga.
"You're the one—what on earth are you doing!? Honestly... if you didn't have money, you should have just said so; I would have lent you a little."
Naga looked greedy for a moment, then immediately shook her head back and forth.
"Who would! In the first place, aren't you my rival!? So why would... I see! I've read you! Lina Inverse! You fear my true power and are trying to win me over with money! Ho-ho-ho-ho! I won't fall for such a trick! —And besides, it is unforgivable to be swayed by money and abandon a job once accepted!"
"—That's quite an admirable attitude—"
I narrowed my eyes slightly and stood with my feet slightly apart.
Twitch.
Naga's expression visibly cramped.
"Then—it looks like we have to fight."
"—O... Oh, Lina, getting all serious... ha... ha ha..."
While flashing a forced smile, she waved her hands dismissively.
"Well, there's an exception to everything. I don't intend to be that stubborn about it either... Come on, don't make such a scary face, okay? Okay?"
...This one was faint-hearted too.
"...Um..."
The man, who had been completely left behind, spoke up timidly and apologetically.
"So, what happens to my position...?"
"...I see..."
The man, who had been tied up by Naga, muttered with a strangely enlightened expression.
"Now then... Oh?"
She turned her gaze toward Lamia, who was standing beside me, stunned and unable to keep up with the situation.
"Aren't you... Princess Lamia? Of the Turadia family."

"Huh?"
My voice and Lamia’s harmonized.
"Wh... how do you know that?"
Without answering her as she asked with a suspicious look, Naga continued.
"Hmm... so it's that matter involving the succession dispute. —Isn't the situation quite different from what you explained to me, Mr. Pyle?"
Seeing the man—Pyle—at a loss for words, she let out her usual stupid laugh with a look of total triumph.
"Ho-ho-ho-ho! I knew it! I saw through the touch of a lie in your words and joined Lina like this!" (Total liar)
But why on earth did Naga know about the circumstances around here...? It was certain she had some unique information network somewhere... Sometimes she knew strange things; I wonder if there’s something like an "Evil Sorcerers' Mutual Aid Association" in this world?
"—Please—"
I suddenly noticed Lamia talking to Pyle, who was still rolled on the ground.
"Tell me... the source of this incident... who on earth instructed you to attack me...?"
Asked, the man turned away.
"Shall we have you answer?"
I stepped forward.
"I'm quite good at this sort of thing too..."
Naga looked down at the man with a greasy gaze. This was quite scary, given her appearance.
"U... Um... could it be, that thing called torture?"
Lamia put her hands to her mouth with a frightened expression.
"If this man won't speak honestly, yes,"
Naga said with a faint smile. A look of sympathy appeared on Lamia’s face.
"Um... but... please don't do anything too terrible..."
"That depends on this man,"
I said. Of course, I also disliked unsophisticated methods like torture, but depending on the situation, I might resort to ruthless means like putting earthworms down someone's back or tickling their ribs mercilessly.
"But... um... at least, please forgive him with something like stuffing his mouth full of gravel and stepping on his cheeks, or cutting his stomach open a little and stuffing baby acid caterpillars inside..."
...Is this girl a demon...?
"Ho-ho-ho-ho! Leave that sort of thing to Naga the White Serpent!"
Letting out a meaningless loud laugh, she took out a knife from nowhere. It was one of those types, with a blade that had a wickedly curved line.

"Now then..."
Applying the silver blade lightly to the cheek of Pyle, whom she had made sit up halfway on the grass, she spoke in a greasy voice.
"I'll have you answer our questions quietly... otherwise..."
"My..."
Lamia muttered softly with both hands to her mouth.
"How lenient..."
"Why are you inciting bloodshed!? What on earth did you learn in the White Magic City!?"
"That is..."
The moment the two of them looked away from Naga and Pyle—Naga let out a small scream!
"What!?"
I turned around to find her lying face down on the ground, her black hair and cape spread wide.
"Naga! Pull yourself together, Naga!"
I pulled her up and shook her body lightly. The knife fell from her hand with a clank.
I glared sharply at Pyle, who sat there still bound.
"...Eh...?"
He turned his face toward me, looking blank. His left cheek, where Naga had been holding the knife, was shallowly cut, and red blood was trickling down it.
"...What did you do to her!?"
"Wh... What do you mean...?"
"It's no use playing dumb!"
I raised my voice. However, I didn't let my momentum carry me into rushing him. I didn't even know what kind of trick Pyle had used to take down Naga. Approaching carelessly was dangerous.
"Oh, it looks like she’s awake."
At Lamia’s nonchalant voice, I looked down to see Naga blinking and groaning weakly in my arms.
"...Ugh..."
She sat up while shaking her head slightly.
"What on earth happened!?"
I asked. Of course, keeping Pyle in the corner of my vision.
"A... Ah... did I not mention it...?"
She started to glance toward Pyle, then hurriedly looked away again.
"I... I get anemic when I see blood... because I'm built so delicately..."
Arrghhhhhh.
"But then, shouldn't you avoid using knives?"

"...Tsk, tsk, tsk... you’re still naive, Princess Lamia. In that situation, it just wouldn't have had the right atmosphere otherwise. Well, it was a miscalculation that my hand slipped and I actually cut his cheek... What's wrong, Lina? Why are you clutching your head?"
—It's nothing!
I didn't even have enough strength left in me to shout that back.
"...Ahhh..."
It was a long time later when I finally recovered and felt like resuming the interrogation.
"About the guy who commissioned you for this..."
At my words, he turned away with a brazen smile.
"Who knows... I didn't meet him directly."
He answered with an attitude that clearly said, "I'm playing dumb."
"Please, answer."
Lamia said, clasping her hands in front of her chest with teary eyes.
"Otherwise, we... might have to poke holes in your eardrums with needles, or peel the skin off your ribs bit by bit and rub salt into them..."
...Maybe it would be better to just finish off this brat sooner rather than later...
Regardless, I ignored her for now, stared at the man for a while, and then said it straight out.
"Hmm... the mastermind is the Minister."
Pyle’s face immediately changed color.
"H... how did you know!? I see! You read my mind!"
I was speechless for a moment.
"Lina-san, you're amazing!"
"Heh... not bad, Lina. You truly are worthy of calling yourself my rival."
Naga and Lamia were overly impressed.
...Well, in truth, I had just said it as a guess, thinking, "Since patterns have been continuing this much, this part must follow the pattern too..." It was somewhat depressing that it actually turned out to be right...
"But... that kind Minister would do something so terrible..."
Lamia muttered sadly, looking down.
"When I get back, I’ll have to kill his entire family, every last one..."
"You... that’s going too far no matter how you look at it."
To Naga’s bitter remark, Lamia looked up with a blank face.
"Oh, can't you tell I'm joking? At your age."
Naga’s kick landed squarely on her temple.
"Ho-hooo."
"Quite the grand welcome..."

Naga and I both flashed defiant smiles at the same time. The sprawling wasteland was dotted with rugged boulders, and the only green was the weeds growing as a token gesture. Perhaps the soil was different; there was a small forest further ahead. And beyond that was our destination, Tyrell City. But—between the forest and us were men in full armor, numbering about forty or fifty. Our friend Pyle, whom we had caught before, had easily escaped the moment we looked away; that's likely how the information leaked to the enemy. It was enough people to take over a small town, but unfortunately, it was far too few to face the pair of Naga and me.
"Well then, do your best."
Lamia said in a tone that made it sound like someone else's problem entirely.
"Leave it to us! We'll settle this in one hit and head to the city immediately."
"Ho-ho-ho-ho! If that's the case, leave it to Naga the White Serpent! I've been feeling a bit underestimated lately, so I'll show you my true power once and for all!"
Ohhh. Clap, clap, clap.
While glancing at Lamia, who was clapping in a lighthearted manner, I openly grimaced.
"...What is it, Lina, that unpleasant face?"
"I hate this from the bottom of my heart."
Just as I thought she would snap back fiercely, she instead puffed out her chest with a huff.
"Ho-ho-ho, it seems you don't like the idea of me playing a big role."
"Yeah."
I nodded honestly.
Twitch!
Her cheek cramped for a moment, but even so, she continued, trying her best to appear calm.
"Heh... it's fine to view me as a rival, but..."
I'm not. I don't.
"Don't get in my way, okay? I'm going to use a spell I'm currently researching."
Re... search... ing...?
This was no joke!
"Dohhh! Please stop! I don't recall ever seeing your 'true power' and having things turn out well!"
"Sh... Shut up! Just watch from there!"
Saying that, she stepped forward.
"It seems you've finished your discussion."
The man standing at the front spoke. That voice—it was Pyle! I couldn't see his face well because of the deep helmet, but sure enough, true to the pattern, he had politely waited for us to finish talking.

"Prepare yourselves this time! Now that we are clad in this magic-resistant armor that blocks all sorcery, your magic is nothing to fear!"
Magic-resistant armor!? I glanced at the armor they were wearing and—
"Hey... that's a total fake."
"...Eh!?"
Pyle let out a stupid sound.
"You must have been scammed by some crooked merchant... It's made to look all gaudy, though."
"...Is that so?"
"Yeah."
It was only natural. In the first place, if something as incredible as "armor that blocks all magic" were rolling around enough for Pyle and his friends to get some, monsters and evil sorcerers would be out of business.
—While we were doing that, it seemed Naga had finished chanting her spell.
"Vu Vraimer!"
Thump!
Along with the "words of power" she uttered, countless rocks rolling on the ground pulsated!
"Wh... What is this!?"
The assassins were thrown into a panic. The rocks rolled, or collided with each other here and there, gradually changing shape—eventually, they took a certain form. They were several times the size of a human—
Dragons!?
About a dozen of them roared toward the sky all at once! The assassins immediately lost their footing. In the midst of that echoed Naga's stupid laugh!
"Ho-ho-ho-ho! This advanced technique of interfering with earth spirits to turn countless rocks into dragons and possessing them with low-level spirits floating nearby to make them stone golems! Behold a skill unique to Naga the White Serpent!"
"...That's all well and good, but..."
Lamia pointed at the "stone dragons" that were howling noisily.
"Were those supposed to be dragons?"
...
Naga was at a loss for words. I followed up with the finishing blow.
"Agreed. The joints are facing the wrong way, and I can't tell if the face is a donkey or what... Could it be that the 'incomplete' part of this spell is your drawing ability?"
"Sh... Shut up! Always complaining about the fine details of someone's spell! What I meant by 'incomplete' was that I can't control them once they're finished, that's all!"
Twitch, twitch!
"...Naga... what... did you... just say...?"

"I said, don't make me say it twice."
"...Um..."
Lamia pointed sharply behind Naga and interjected apologetically.
"...They're running wild... those things..."
"...Oh... so they are..."
Turning around, Naga muttered blankly. The assassins had long since fled, and the things running across the deserted wasteland with a thundering sound were the stone dragons (pseudo) that Naga had made.
"—It’s okay."
Naga turned back to us and raised her index finger. I didn't miss the single bead of sweat trickling down her cheek as she tried to appear calm.
"Because—there’s nothing in that direction but Tyrell City."
"Hieeeeeeeeeee!"
Lamia let out an exaggerated scream.
And then—the battle was over, and the sun set.
"It’s over, isn't it—"
"Arghhhhhhh"
"Yes... finally..."
On a small hill overlooking Tyrell City, we were standing in the setting sun.
"Well... how should I put it?"
"It can't be helped since it’s already done..."
"Arghhhhhhhhhhhhhh"
Ignoring Lamia, who had been crouching and groaning blankly for a while, we tried our best to appear calm as we looked at Tyrell City, about a third of which had been turned into rubble. Most of it was destroyed by the (pseudo) dragons Naga made, and just a tiny bit of damage was caused by the magical aftermath when Naga and I defeated them. (Please believe me.)
"I... I know, I have a great idea!"
Having thought of something, Naga suddenly clapped her hands.
"Listen carefully, Lamia. Let’s just say that the one who made those dragons go wild was the Minister's subordinate who was targeting your life!" (Malicious)
"Ohhh! That’s a nice idea!"
I immediately agreed. (Accomplice)
"...That’s right, let’s go with that!"
Instead of fiercely opposing it, Lamia nodded with her eyes sparkling.
...I didn't quite understand it, but anyway, an accomplice relationship was established!
"But if that's the case, we guarded the princess and saved the town."
"Which means we're the heroines of this town! Heroines!"

"—And that means, naturally, a massive reward besides the emerald we got before!"
Naga said, forgetting what she herself had done.
"Well, that’s if I were the real princess."
Twitch!
Naga and I froze at her cheerfully spoken words.
"Wh..."
"What did you... just say...?"
"Did you two really believe it? That I am the real Princess Lamia..."
"B... B... But..."
Naga pointed at her, her mouth hanging open.
"You've seen the real one, haven't you? See, I look just like her."
We were completely at a loss for words.
"No matter how good a plan it is, do you really think the real princess would travel all alone? Think logically. Even if she wanted to, the people around her wouldn't allow it. I’m just a lookalike meant to draw the attention of assassins—just a body double."
"Ah..."
"Ohhh..."
Naga and I looked at each other and simultaneously flashed cramped smiles.
"So, I don't think there will be a reward. —Well, if the truth comes out, I know I’ll be severely punished, so I’ll go along with that lie from earlier... Wait... Um... excuse me!?"
She should be grateful it ended with just being knocked flat.
Postscript: On second thought, I feel like everything was Naga's fault...

(Little Princess: End)

Labrinth

Editors Note: This is one of the OVA episodes.

The door opened. It made a nasty, creaking sound. The black shadow standing in the doorway cast a brief glance across the interior of the shop and spoke.
"Ho-ho-ho-ho! It’s work, Lina! I’ve found work! ...Wait, what is this? Why are you suddenly burying your face in potato salad?"
"Ah... uhm... listen, Naga..."
I managed to pick myself up and, while wiping the salad off my face, sent a weary gaze toward the woman standing across the table. Naga the White Serpent—the self-proclaimed rival who clung to me like a goldfish’s tail. She was a beauty with long black hair and an intellectual countenance, but unfortunately, her outfit was anything but normal. I could forgive the long black mantle, but the needlessly revealing costume and the skull pendant were a bit much. To top it off, her black shoulder guards were elaborately fitted with sharp spikes. On a day when someone like her—someone who expressed with her entire soul, "I am a specimen of an evil female sorceress!"—kicked open the door of a restaurant and called out in a loud voice, there was no choice but to face-plant into the table.
"Can’t you... well, how should I put it, just live life a bit more normally?"
The moment I said that, she arched her eyebrows.
"Ho-ho... mind telling me? Just what part of me isn't normal?"
"Argh! The fact that you can ask that question with such a straight face is exactly what’s not normal! ...A-anyway! I'll hear the details outside!"
Unable to bear the stares of the people around us, I hurriedly stood up. I didn't mind standing out, but being a public spectacle was another matter entirely. I paid the bill while leaving nearly half my meal behind and left the shop with Naga. ...Ah... goodbye, my beloved grilled meat set...
"...So? What about the work? It had better be something decent."
As we walked down the street lined with stalls, I questioned Naga, who was walking beside me.
"Leave it to me! This time, it’s a wonderful request that benefits society and helps people, yet provides a reward!"

Be... benefits society and helps people... Was I the only one who felt a bottomless sense of wrongness hearing those words come out of Naga's mouth?
"So, what kind of work is it in the end?"
"Well, to put it simply, it’s a life-saving rescue."
Li... life-saving rescue... Thump...
Feeling a slight dizziness, I stopped in my tracks.
"...W-wait a minute, Naga. You didn't just say—I hope I'm wrong—but you didn't just say 'life-saving rescue,' did you?"
"I did. What of it?"
She said it as if it were nothing. I let out a tired sigh.
"Listen... Naga, do you know the phrase 'know thyself'?"
"What’s that supposed to mean!"
"It means exactly what it says! Exactly! In the first place, just think about it! I hate to say this about myself, but there hasn't been a single time when the two of us teamed up and everything ended peacefully! For us to try a life-saving rescue, even a zombie would die laughing!"
It was a quite persuasive speech (and a bit sad), even if I did say so myself, but she brushed it aside.
"Hmph... you’re naive, Lina Inverse."
She held up her index finger and gave it a little "tsk-tsk" wag.
"You don't seem to know the phrase 'nothing to lose'..."
...At that moment, I recognized her terrifying nature once again.
The scent of cold, damp greenery hung in the air. We stood before a light-gray building buried in the earth and covered in moss and vines. It was deep in the mountains, a short distance from the village. According to the story she had heard, several young men from the village had entered the depths of these ruins half in jest as a test of courage. Several days had passed, and they still hadn't returned. Had they lost their way inside, or—there were rumors that strange monsters had lived in these ruins since long ago, and the villagers were too afraid to go inside. That was when the village chief called out to Naga in her sorceress attire. So, our job this time was to confirm their safety and rescue them if they were unharmed. It seemed these ruins were originally a large building that had been buried, connecting to natural caves here and causing cave-ins there, making it quite a complex labyrinth...
"I know! I have a great idea!"
I clapped my hands together.
"What is it?"
"We'll just blow these ruins away with a Dragon Slave or something, and then say, 'Oh well, it didn't work. Heh heh!' Yeah! This way we can finish it with very little effort!"

"What are you thinking! Listen, what we are trying to do is rescue work! What’s the point if you bury them in the darkness!"
"But... it looks so troublesome that I'd rather blow myself up..."
I looked at the ruins. The shape of the mountain was strangely distorted. That was probably the part where the building was buried... but man, it was huge.
"W-well, certainly it is..."
Naga was lost for words for a moment.
"Right?"
"B-but, look, if you say ruins, there might be all sorts of treasures rolling around..."
She added that as a follow-up, almost as if trying to convince herself. Twitch!
Treasure... With a creaking sound, I turned my face toward Naga.
"Heh... treasure... ehehehehehe."
"W-wait! Are you okay!?"
She watched me with a creeped-out expression while slowly backing away.
"That’s right! Treasure! Not just simple gold, silver, and jewels, but unknown magic books and various secret treasures hidden with magical power! If it’s here, there might certainly be such things! Heh... ehehehehe."
With lightning as a backdrop (in my mind), I got excited all by myself.
"A-anything is fine... but could you at least stop laughing like that? It feels... like something very dangerous is going on..."
"In any case, now that we've decided, let's get inside quickly!"
"Fine, fine... honestly, you’re so materialistic... that’s why they call you an underdeveloped, pragmatic spell-obsessed idiot."
"...Who said that...?"
"Hmph, I did, obviously."
Wham!
My kick landed squarely on the side of Naga's head as she struck a pose and brushed back her hair.
The labyrinth was as deep as expected. We had walked quite a bit since entering, but we still hadn't reached the back of the labyrinth. The light from the entrance was no longer visible, and the only things illuminated by the "Light" I had created above my head were Naga and myself, along with the walls and ceiling full of stains and cracks that seemed to go on forever—and torch-holders in the shape of magical beast faces lining the walls. Occasionally, startled by the light, strange insects I had never seen before would go scuttling across the walls, which was just so "pretty." The stagnant air, smelling faintly sweet and rotten, was simply "delicious."
...I really shouldn't have come...
At this point, my physical strength was one thing, but my willpower and resolve were already almost completely exhausted.

"Hey, Nagaaa, I'm bored, I'm tired, let's go home already."
"What are you saying, acting like a child! ...But you seem particularly unmotivated about this job—you're not planning to slack off just because it's a job I picked up, are you?"
"That’s not the issue. Look, think about it carefully. Why do we have to rescue a bunch of guys who wandered into a place like this half in jest and got themselves lost? If they didn't have the confidence or skill to do something about it themselves when the time came, they shouldn't have come in here in the first place."
"Well... that’s true, but..."
"Right? Right? So let's go home, Naga."
"I said no! We can't do that!"
"...Fine... cheapskate."
At any rate, since it had come to this, the only thing to do was find them quickly and finish the job.
"...But there sure are a lot of branching paths. If we make one mistake, we won't even be able to get back ourselves."
As I spoke, I made a mark on the wall with the chalk in my left hand. At my words, Naga started to open her mouth—but then she suddenly stopped in her tracks and, with her hands on her hips, let her searching gaze drift through the air. I stopped as well—I heard it.
"A voice," Naga whispered.
Certainly—deep within the dark labyrinth, echoing from somewhere, was unmistakably a human voice. I couldn't make out the content, but several voices seemed to be having a conversation. If it wasn't a paranormal phenomenon—it had to be the people we were looking for. There was a possibility it was another group that had arrived by chance, but the probability of that was extremely low.
"Hey! Are you alive!" I shouted at the top of my lungs.
There was a moment of hesitant silence, and then—several voices erupted in a huge commotion all at once. High-pitched sounds like metal clashing were mixed in.
"...It seems they are safe." I let out a sigh of relief.
"Good... I'm glad they're alive... Searching for corpses that don't even answer when you call is really hard, you know."
"You... what kind of worrying is that..." Naga glared at me with cold eyes.
"Anyway, let's move forward."
Saying that, I began walking again toward where the voices seemed to have come from.
Inside the labyrinth where sounds echoed excessively, after going down the wrong path several times, the two of us finally reached our destination. A large door stood in the wall of the corridor, with a giant dragon's head carved in relief. The voices were

echoing from the other side. Seeing how they were banging on the door from the inside, it seemed that this door couldn't be opened from that side.
"Alright, alright! I'll open the door for you now, so don't make a fuss, just step back and wait!"
I said that and carefully examined the dragon's head carved on the door. And—there was a trick after all! It was completely cliché, but for us, it was easier than if it had been strangely elaborate. When I pushed the dragon's eye, a small "click" sounded from somewhere. And then—the door made a lighter sound than expected and slowly began to open outward. About a dozen men came tumbling out. They wore ordinary tunics and trousers, a very common villager style. There was only one thing worthy of note—namely, the fact that all of them had already turned into zombies—
"GYAAAAAAHHHH!"
Our screams echoed through the darkness of the cave.
Zombies—there was probably no need to explain them now, as they were top-class famous among the "Living Dead." Their power and life force—or rather, their persistence—was quite something, but they were incredibly slow. A decent sorcerer or a warrior with even a basic magical weapon could win easily, and against us, they were a cakewalk. But—the problem was the mental impact. Suddenly, when we were completely unprepared, several half-rotted, (description deleted due to censorship)[1] figures came tumbling out. Pushed by surprise and physiological disgust, we instinctively started running at full speed.
"...Come... come to think of it..."
Naga said, gasping for breath, after we had run around quite a bit with that momentum.
"There was no reason for us to run away... we could have just defeated them right there..."
"I... I feel the same way..."
"But... were those really the people who got lost...?" Naga muttered.
"Who knows... it’s certainly highly probable, but it could also be completely unrelated zombies..."
But the voice that answered our call back then... it seemed that it really had been a paranormal phenomenon (foul play).
"But what should we do, Naga?"
"About what?"
"I ran around so haphazardly just now that I don't know the way anymore."
"...Hmph, is that all?"
She said that with her chest puffed out, tilting her head slightly.

---

[1] Not by me, the translator / editor.

"What!? No way, Naga, you..."
"Of course!" She puffed out her chest even further.
"I haven't remembered a single thing from the very beginning!"
Cr-crack!
I felt like I certainly heard the sound of my own skull cracking.
"What are you so proud of! You!"
"I was trying to tell you not to lose your composure! Me!"
...Ugh...
"You just don't have the slightest grasp of the situation!"
...Ugh... hic... hic...
"What of it!"
Hic, hic, hic, hic...
"What do you mean 'what of it'..."
Hic, hic, hic!
That was when we first noticed it—the sound of sobbing (?) coming from the back of the passage. A white mist was floating in the middle of the passage that vanished into pitch black. It was faintly shaped like a human silhouette. A wraith! ...Man, that was one attention-seeking wraith. It was incredibly lacking in atmosphere. At any rate, nearly ten of them were slowly advancing toward us.
"Hmph! Leave this to me!" Naga said with total confidence. I openly grimaced.
Every time she showed a glimpse of her bottomless power, she caused immense trouble for everyone around her, friend and foe alike, but she herself didn't have a shred of self-awareness about it. I hurriedly warned her.
"B-but Naga, don't use any flashy spells. It'll be bad if this place collapses."
"I know."
Saying that, she began to chant a small spell. She used both hands to weave signs in front of her chest and stomach—
At that moment, I suddenly realized something. —This spell!?
"No, Naga! That spell is—"
But it was already too late—she threw both hands, which had finished the signs, high above her head—and abruptly crouched down on the spot.
...As I thought...
I quietly walked over to her side as she sat there with both hands over her cheeks, her eyes welling up with tears.
"...You poked your cheeks, didn't you... with the spikes on your shoulder guards..."
"...Whimper..." Naga nodded with a pathetic sound.
...Don't cry... please...
At any rate, I had to do something here! I chanted a spell and quietly thrust my right palm forward.

"Elmekia Lance!"
The shockwave of blue light born from my right palm pierced through the wraiths. Instantly—they let out a scream and fled at full speed. This spell worked as a shockwave against humans and other normal creatures, but against the "Living Dead" or monsters, it acted as light that caused extreme pain or discomfort. Also, since it wasn't a shockwave caused by wind and was highly directional, it could be used safely in a straight passage like this.
'—Hmph, you're not half bad.'
The voice came suddenly from behind. —What!...
I turned around in a hurry. But there was no sign of a shadow, let alone a presence. Perhaps the "voice" was coming out of the mouth of the torch-holding beast, through a pipe in the wall or something.
'A quite energetic sacrifice. You are indeed worthy of becoming my flesh and blood.'
Sacrifice...? Could it be...
"Who are you!"
Naga, who had recovered, asked the question. After a low, suppressed laugh, the voice replied:
'My name is Steindorf. Lord of this labyrinth and one who draws the blood of high-born darkness...'
"A vampire!" I shouted.
Vampires—they were probably the most popular among the "Living Dead." In almost every aspect, they surpassed normal humans in ability, and some used powerful sorcery.
'Hmph... you're quick on the uptake...'
"Of course! With that incredibly pretentious way of speaking and that kind of name, anyone who didn't know would have to be crazy! ...More than anything, the only ones in this wide world with enough of an ego to call themselves 'high-born' or 'drawing the blood of darkness' are the vampire clan!"
—A brief silence.
'...Y-you have quite a tongue...'
He was mad, definitely mad.
'You silver-tongued humans!'
As he spoke, a faint light leaked from somewhere deep in the passage.
'Then come! To my side! I shall show you my power, worthy of the name of a Dark Aristocrat!'
"...Let's just leave him be," Naga said in a detached tone, but I firmly shook my head. She looked at me suspiciously.
"Why? That's not like you, you who hate trouble... could it be, pride?"
I shook my head again.

"Listen, Naga, think about it. Ancient ruins, a vampire living there... that means..."
"I see!" Her face brightened. We clapped our hands together, and our voices harmonized perfectly.
'Treasure!'
We advanced through the dark passage toward where the light was getting stronger. Even though I said "dark," the "Light" I had fixed above my head was working, so there was no trouble at all for walking.
"Naga," I said to her as we walked.
"What is it?"
"We've been set up, perfectly."
"Eh?" She stopped in her tracks and sent a suspicious gaze my way. "What do you mean?"
"That vampire said something about 'sacrifices' earlier, didn't he?"
"...Now that you mention it, I feel like he did say something like that."
"In other words, my theory is that from the very beginning, there were no villagers who got lost here."
"Huh?" Her eyes went wide.
"You know, it's a common pattern. A monster settles in a mountain or something and demands sacrifices from the nearby town or village. That's probably it this time."
"....."
It seemed she didn't quite understand yet.
"It's probably like this. At some point, that vampire settled in these ruins and regularly demanded sacrifices from that nearby village. But it's only natural they wouldn't want to send sacrifices from the village. So, they lied to a traveling jack-of-all-trades with no clear background and said, 'Please rescue the missing people,' then sent them in here. As sacrifices. —To put it simply, the village chief tricked you."
"W-what did you saaaay!?"
"Ack! W-wait! Choking... can't breathe... cough, cough... Hey, what are you doing suddenly strangling my neck!"
"I was angry, so for now! For now!"
"Don't just use whatever is nearby! Honestly..."
"Anyway, if that's the case, once we get out of here, I'll have to go say hello to the village chief..."
Saying that, she let out a low, suppressed laugh. She was really ticked off...
"Anyway, we have to defeat that vampire first. Come on, let's finish this quickly."
Saying that, I began walking again.
Eventually, the two of us stood before a large door. ...Why is it that bosses and the like are always in the back of a large room with such a grand door? ...Well, even if it

were novel, it’s true that it would be a bit sad if a boss-level guy were crouching in a room like a toilet...
"Welcome..."
Along with the voice, the door slowly opened. A dimly lit, gray, large room (as expected). The center of the room was raised, and on top of it was a black coffin—
Creak... The lid of the coffin opened slowly.
"...Since we're underground, I feel like there's no particular need to go to the trouble of getting into a coffin..."
At my remark, the hand peeking out from the coffin stopped for a moment. But perhaps regaining his composure, the coffin lid eventually opened wide, and a man sat up. A tall man with golden hair slicked back, wearing a black mantle. ...Just as I thought, he was incredibly cliché.
"It is a pleasure to meet you. I am the king of this labyrinth, the vampire Steindorf..."
He gave a deep bow as he spoke.
"Yeah, whatever." I waved my hands dismissively as if it were too much trouble. "If you're going to do it, just come at us quickly."
"W-what did you saaaay!!" Oh. He was really mad.
"Fine! Then as you wish, I shall tear your throat open!"
...No one wished for that, honestly...
Whoosh! Strength filled the vampire's entire body. All his muscles bulged greatly, and then—he began to transform! His human form distorted hideously, and black fur grew all over his body. His ears protruded greatly— Gyaaa!
Having finished the transformation, he let out a shout of joy. A giant bat! ...Well, I suppose the normal way of interacting here would be to tremble with fear and fall into a panic...
But why would you get weaker... Holding his large body, he was somehow floating in the air, wobbling.
"There." Naga threw a stone with utter nonchalance, and it hit the giant bat right in the head. Wham! He was shot down quite easily and reverted from his transformation.
"Y-you've done it now! For a mere human! In that case, I shall bury you with my strongest secret art!"
As he spoke, he thrust both hands forward and began chanting a spell. —Th-this is...
"Here it comes! Flare Arrow!"
In front of his raised hands—pop!—a single arrow of flame about the length of a carrot appeared.
.....
"GO!"
With that shout, the arrow—well, to use an analogy, it crawled through the air at a speed like a turtle doing a low crawl.

"Fuhahaha! See that! You are too terrified to even speak!"
Crawwwl, crawwwl...
Naga and I stared with blank expressions as the thing called a "Flare Arrow" came toward us bit by bit.
"Perish! You fools who wandered into my home! Fuhahahahahahahahaha!"
The vampire Stein-whoever, finished his loud laugh—and apparently had nothing more to say. —Silence. The three of us just stared in silence at the Flare Arrow (?) as it struggled and crawled along.
"—Argh! This is taking too long!"
Running out of patience, he abruptly stomped over to the Flare Arrow, grabbed it with his right hand, and pulled it right in front of my eyes.
"This is better!"
...That is... quite a versatile Flare Arrow. You can't normally do that. A feat like that... anyway, for now, it was a Flare Arrow right in front of my eyes, so I suppose it was only polite to show some reaction... probably...
I quickly drew the short sword at my waist and swatted it away. Ah. It was still crawling on the floor... what kind of Flare Arrow was this...
"Ohhhhh! Impossible! My Flare Arrow!"
The vampire hurriedly rushed over and crouched down.
"Don't bother picking it up! Not that thing!"
My kick landed squarely in his side.
"...Hmph, how cheap."
Spitting out a line like a total villain, I walked over to the vampire, who was tied up with a rope infused with magical power.
"Hey, Steiny, is there anything else?"
"S-Steiny...?"
"Vampire or Steindorf, it’s just too hard to say. More. Than. That. Is there no other treasure?"
"Hieeee. I... I'm sorry, that’s all there is!"
After I beat him up a little, Steiny suddenly became timid and spoke with a voice mixed with tears.
"...It can't be helped." Naga said while putting the knapsack full of treasure on her back (Note: It didn't suit her at all).
"He doesn't seem to be lying... Shall we head back, Lina?"
"Yeah..." I also hoisted my bag. "The problem is how to get back."
Muttering that, she pretended to think deeply. For now, if we could just get back to where I had left the chalk marks, everything would work out... It was a pain, but I had no choice but to look for them with her.
"Hey, Naga."

"What is it?"
"Did you notice? That I was writing all sorts of things on the walls with chalk?"
"Oh, those—" She said with a strangely unpleasant expression. "I wasn't very impressed. I was planning to warn you about your habit of scribbling all over the place without any restraint."
"...Huh? Scribbling...?"
"I erased them as I went along. All of them."
Snap!
"...A... a... aaaa..."
"Honestly... you're not a child..."
"Youuuuu! What have you done! Those weren't scribbles! They were landmarks to the exit!"
"Then you should have said so clearly!"
"Even if I didn't say it, you could have figured it out if you thought about it for a second!"
" I didn't think about it at all!"
"Don't be proud of that! Please!"
Saying that, I gasped for breath. ...Just as I was on the verge of giving up, I suddenly realized something. I went back to Steiny's side.
"If you're saying there's no more treasure, fine, but in exchange—if I can put it that way—you're going to tell us the way to the exit."
"Hmph..." At my words, Steiny flashed a cold smile for a moment. "Then first, I must tell the story of the night I came here."
"No one's asking for that!"
"Just listen. Driven from my homeland, wandering, one day the entrance to these ruins appeared before my eyes."
"No, like I said..."
"I decided to make this my second home, and immediately went down to the nearby village and demanded a monthly sacrifice from the village chief. Then I turned back and entered the depths of this new dwelling, but..."
...Hey... no way...
"The interior was more complex than I thought. To be honest, I have no idea what's where."
Clang...
This time for sure—something inside my head collapsed.
"Could it be, you also got lost?"
Naga, putting herself aside and using a reproving tone, spoke to him. He smiled again and said:

"Hmph... that seems to be the case. It seems the sacrifices are being delivered faithfully, but they seem to die somewhere before they get to me, and get possessed by low-level spirits and turn into zombies. Honestly, including food, I've been struggling lately. Hahaha."
The vampire's stupid laugh dealt the final blow to my brain. Snap...
"Bury him! Bury him! This idiot vampire!"
"GYAAAAAA! Save me!"
"Ah! Lina! Calm down!"
Postscript: It took four days to escape. I'm never doing it again! One of Naga's jobs, that is!

(Labyrinth: End)

The Lina Elimination Order

"Do you two have confidence in your skills?"

The sudden voice reached us just as we were picking at the desserts of our course menu. Naga and I paused our meal and turned our gaze toward the speaker. An old man stood there.

We were in a remarkably desolate dining hall, located in a tiny, desolate village along a desolate highway. Aside from us, the only other person who could remotely be called a customer was a lone woman, appearing to be a traveler, sitting at a table some distance away. It was a quiet village—or rather, a place devoid of any vitality. I had sensed the faint scent of trouble from the moment we arrived, but...

"Confidence in our skills, you say?"

Upon being asked, Naga stood up abruptly, her chair scraping against the floor, and puffed out her chest grandly.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! Don't make me laugh! When it comes to wielding the arts of sorcery, there aren't five people in this world who can stand to the right of me, Naga the White Serpent!"

"He-hey, Naga!"

I hurriedly stood up, grabbed her hand, and pulled her toward a corner of the room. Speaking in a low voice so as not to be heard by the old man, who remained standing there dazed by Naga's sudden reaction, I hissed at her.

"This is probably a request for some kind of job... but surely you aren't planning to accept it!?"

"...I don't see why not... Could it be, Lina, that you don't want to take it?" Naga whispered back, caught up in my tone.

"Exactly."

At my answer, she puffed out her chest again while remaining quiet.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho... I see through you, Lina. Judging by how that old man asked if we had confidence in our skills, the opponent—whoever they may be—must be quite formidable. Knowing that, you've become uneasy about whether you can win."

"That's not the issue," I said.

This was a well-justified boast, but there was not a single person in this world—or rather, almost no one—who could match me, Lina Inverse, a warrior and a sorceress. The reason I didn't say "not a single person" was simple: for a fleeting moment, the faces of a few people, starting with my sister back home, crossed my mind.

"Listen, Naga, think about it carefully. Judging by the state of this village, it doesn't look like we'll earn much. It's probably the usual pattern where the villagers are being bullied by a bandit group or some monsters. Do you really think it's a good use of our precious youth to spend these grueling, sun-scorched hours trekking on and on toward the enemy's base, only to defeat them and receive a pittance of a reward? On a hot day like this, youth is about sipping cold juice all day long in a dining hall or somewhere shady, well-ventilated, and dim. Don't you agree?"

"...I feel like that's a strangely decadent image of youth..."

"It's just your imagination," I declared.

For someone like Naga, who wore a so-called "evil sorceress look" with an absurd amount of skin showing, it probably wasn't that hot. To her, someone who seemed to lack thermal sensitivity or even taste buds to begin with, this level of heat was likely nothing. However, for a delicate and sensitive person like me, it was quite unbearable.

To you over there thinking, "She's just being selfish!" ...Fine, whatever. Leave me alone.

Of course, I could keep cool by using a minor chilling spell inside the mantle that completely covered my body, but I couldn't do the same for my face. Being exposed to the summer sun meant my skin would get rough, my hair would get damaged and lose its luster, and I'd end up with weird tan patterns. There wasn't a single good thing about it.

"...At any rate, you have no intention of taking this job."

"To put it bluntly, yes."

"Well, I'll take it. My body's been getting a bit soft lately."

"Suit yourself."

Looking somewhat offended by my utterly disinterested reply, she nonetheless returned in silence to the table where the old man was waiting.

"It seems you have some trouble," she said in a voice that was unusually calm for her, staring intently at the old man.

The old man met Naga's gaze for a while. After a moment, he let out a long breath and began to speak bit by bit.

For the most part, the incident was exactly as I had predicted. A person calling themselves a "sorceress of terror" or some such nonsense had allegedly teamed up with a band of brigands, built a fort in the mountains, and was bullying the local villagers. The request from the old man (who was apparently the village chief) was for someone to defeat them.

—As a complete aside, these "evil sorcerers" actually appear overwhelmingly often in rural areas. Someone belonging to a small-world Sorcerer's Association in a remote region where "being able to use Flare Arrow is amazing" might happen to discover an attack spell slightly more powerful than a Flare Arrow. They immediately get carried away and start thinking, "Could it be that I'm actually a genius?" Consequently, losing to the gap between the surrounding world's evaluation and their own inflated self-image, they resolve, "Fiiiine! Then I'll show you my true power!" and set off on a path of delinquency.

—Generally, this type of person calls themselves a "Sorcerer of Darkness" or, in extreme cases, a "Great Demon King." They shut themselves away in ruins or caves, work zombies or goblins to the bone, and indulge in their own gloomy self-satisfaction. Usually, even if left alone, after a few years they start feeling somewhat empty, or they realize their power isn't actually that great. They often end up quietly abandoning their hideout and spending the rest of their days modestly in another village, doing fortune-telling or suddenly taking up farming. To put it simply, it's a kind of rite of passage, like the measles.

...Though it's a fact that for those around them, it's nothing but a massive nuisance.

For an incident of this level, Naga alone would be more than enough.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! Very well. I, Naga the White Serpent, shall take responsibility for this matter!"

"Oh! How grateful I am!" Overcome with emotion, the old man grabbed both of Naga's hands firmly.

"Well then, Naga, do your best," I said casually.

The old man snapped his eyes open in surprise. "Are you not going!?"

"She's enough on her own. I don't know who the opponent is, but she's plenty powerful herself."

"No, no matter how great Naga-dono's magical power may be, she cannot possibly defeat that person alone. That notorious—"

Mid-sentence, the old man suddenly hesitated. Naga knitted her brows slightly.

"—Hmm? What's the matter? ...Aha... Ho-ho-ho! I see, you think I'll get cold feet once I hear the opponent's name!"

"N-no, that is..."

the decent old man's fluster was an affirmation of Naga's words.

"...That means it's a fairly famous opponent. Speaking of those who wield sorcery, there's Elisiell the Sorceress, or Zuma the Darkness Assassin, or Zelgadis the Magic Swordsman..."

At every name she rattled off, the old man shook his head. There were names I had heard before, but most were new to me. How she was so well-informed about such odd details remained a mystery.

"You must have heard of them too..." Breaking into Naga's words, the old man spoke in a grave tone.

"...Hair of crimson that pierces the heavens, clad in black lightning. One who craves blood, who destroys all living things and turns the earth into a dark wasteland. The child of destruction, the herald of chaos. The Hell Sorceress, Lina Inverse..."

Thud!

I collapsed right then and there, taking the table with the dessert still on it down with me.

Wh-who are you talking about!? Who is that!? Even I have been called things like "The Bandit Killer" or "The One Even Dragons Step Over" behind my back, but there was no reason to be slandered this ridiculously!

...Just to be safe, I'm not saying there was a reason for me to be called "Bandit Killer" or "Dragon-Stepper." It was likely a rumor spread by an impostor using my name to instill fear in the villagers... Regardless, I couldn't just let this go. I managed to pull myself up and said:

"That is an impostor!"

...Actually, it wasn't me who said that. It was the other customer who had been eating at the distant table. She was a fair-skinned beauty with silver hair and a somewhat delicate air about her, possessing an image that somehow reminded one of the Elf race.

"I too have heard rumors of Lina Inverse, but Lina is at least not the kind of person who would do such things!"

"Exactly!" I said, putting some force into it.

"That sorceress must be using Lina's name to intimidate the villagers and the assassins who come to defeat her!"

With a flame of aura burning behind her and putting an unusual amount of effort into it, the silver-haired woman got excited all by herself.

"Naga-san!" She gripped Naga's hands tightly, her eyes moistening. "Please, let me assist in this matter as well!"

"O-oh... okay..." Naga nodded, overwhelmed by her momentum.

"Thank you! Now that it's decided, let us depart at once! We shall combine our two powers into one and crush the evil of this world!"

Perhaps it was just an optical illusion, but for a moment, I thought I saw crashing waves and a shining morning sun behind her as she put her right arm around Naga's shoulder and pointed toward the horizon with her left hand.

"—By the way—" Naga looked at me with teasing eyes. "You're coming too, aren't you?"

"...I have no choice, do I? If that's how it is..."

Thus, the three of us began our march toward the mountain where the base of Lina Inverse (the impostor) was located, bathed in the summer afternoon sunlight.

"By the way, what's your name?"

To my question, "she" answered without any friendliness. "I am not someone worth naming. Come, more importantly, hurry!"

She pointed sharply toward the mountain. "Let us hasten to the enemy's stronghold!"

Once again, I thought I saw a blazing red sunset beyond the tip of her finger.
...Hmm... what is this...

"...But Lina, I wonder what kind of person that impostor is," Naga whispered softly so as not to be heard by "her." "I wonder if their eyes look a bit meaner than the real thing, or if their clothes have one extra line in the pattern?"

"...What exactly are you expecting?"

"Well, aren't you curious? About what your own impostor looks like."

"Of course I'm curious, but..."

I momentarily started to imagine the impostor's appearance, but since it seemed like it was going to turn into a terrifying thought, I stopped immediately. Regardless, everything would be settled once we met the opponent!

It was a small tower. Perhaps there had been a fort or something around here in the past. Judging by the construction, it seemed to be a watchtower. Nowadays, it was blocked by the thick mountain trees, so it didn't look like it could serve as a watchtower anymore. The lower part of the tower had probably been connected to the fort originally. Now, it had turned into a heap of crumbled rubble, with one large hole gaping open. Seeing two men who looked like brigands standing guard in front of it, that had to be the entrance to the interior.

"Well then, how are we going to break in?"

I had completely settled into the role of a spectator and questioned the two in an irresponsible tone.

"Hmph. Naturally, we should break through by force."

"Subtlety is unnecessary for insolent wretches who steal another's name! We should push through head-on with fair and square might, and make them realize their own powerlessness!"

Even if their wording differed, the content was exactly the same: brute force. ...I bet they really haven't thought of anything... these two...

"For now, please leave those two guards to me."

Saying that, "she" began to chant a spell. —Ho. This spell.

"Sleep!"

The two guards fell over quite easily.

"Heh, you're pretty good," I said.

Actually, the spell "Sleep" was a remarkably simple spell that anyone could use just by memorizing it. Because of that, this spell is never taught anywhere. The reason is

simple. If you think about it for a moment, spells like this, or "Lock" and "Unlock," are easily abused. If one could use these three, theft and kidnapping would be at one's beck and call. If such dangerous spells were to become mainstream, public order would be non-existent.

So, how does one go about using this spell? One develops it oneself. In other words, being able to use this spell meant she had a solid understanding of the structure and content of spells and possessed enough skill to construct it herself.

"No, it was nothing special. More importantly, from here on is the enemy's base. We must be prepared."

"She" gripped my hand and Naga's hand tightly, while flames flickered deep in her eyes. "You'll entrust your lives to me, won't you!"

"No."

"You've got to be joking."

"....."

"She" fell silent for a moment.

"A-anyway, let's charge! Now! Race you to that entrance!"

"She" started running as soon as she said it. Naga and I were forced to follow. Honestly... what an exhausting woman.

The brawl continued. Whether it was originally built that way or modified later, I didn't know, but the tower was divided into four small rooms on each floor. It was an extremely tedious structure where you could only go to the room with the stairs leading up after passing through all of them. Naturally, most rooms had guards, and we defeated them as we went. By the time we broke through the second floor, I was already getting quite tired of it.

I wanted to burst through the walls or ceiling with a Vibration Blast or something and get it over with at once, but I had done that once before and ended up collapsing the building. Of course, there was also the option of burying the entire tower at once from the outside with a Dragon Slave, but I wanted to see what kind of person was using my name.

"Come! Let's go! Three more rooms and we've cleared the third floor!"

"Ooh..." At her unusually energetic encouragement, Naga and I raised a desperate, half-hearted battle cry.

We hid ourselves against the walls on both sides of the door leading to the next room and threw it open in one go. After a moment's pause to confirm there were no attacks like arrows and sensing the atmosphere inside, the three of us poured into the room. There was a small table and four chairs. Cards were scattered across the table.

"It seems this room is empty," Naga said something that even a child could see. At that exact moment—

Bam! With a loud noise, the door we had entered through closed. Naga hurriedly jumped at it.

"It's no use! It won't open!"

"Same here!" "She" said, clinging to the door leading to the next room. "This must be a trap!"

Like I said, I know that.

"Fufufu, ha-ha-ha-ha, haaaaa-ha-ha-ha!"

It was exactly then that we heard a loud laugh reminiscent of a leader of a small-scale evil organization.

"Who are you!" "She" hurriedly looked around.

"Where are you looking? Up here, up here." It was a woman's voice that sounded more coarse than husky.

As told, everyone looked up—a part of the ceiling was gaping open, and a square hole appeared. The chimney-like hole likely went through the fourth floor and connected to the floor of the fifth. It was quite high up. It felt just like looking up from the bottom of a well.

—Speaking of which, when I was little, I used to misbehave and get thrown into the well by my sister back home. Come to think of it, the fact that I've grown into such an upright person is entirely thanks to my sister. ...Though I still sometimes have nightmares about those times and wake up in a cold sweat... anyway.

Eventually, a woman appeared at the top of the hole. She had curly red hair and tanned, brownish skin. The amount of skin her costume showed was quite high, though not as much as Naga's. She was an unusually sturdy, large woman who felt robust rather than sexy.

...No way... could this be...

"Fuhahaha! I don't know what kind of meddlers you are, but do you know who I am? I am Lina Inverse!"

Aaaaaagh! I knew it!

"Fufufufufu-hmm." Naga tapped my shoulder twice and pointed at the impostor above with an amused look. "She said she's Lina Inverse. Fufuh-hmm."

...What are you trying to say...?

I wanted to give her a piece of my mind, but unfortunately, we weren't in a position to do that.

"Of course! We came because we knew you were an impostor using the name of Lina Inverse!"

At "her" words, the impostor's face stiffened slightly. "Fufun, I don't know what you're talking about. Well, at any rate, you're all going to disappear here."

She began to chant a spell as she spoke.

"Fireball!?" At Naga's shout, I released my spell.

"Vibration Blast!"

I had already begun chanting a spell for our escape the moment the door behind us closed. My spell brilliantly blew apart the door leading to the next room.

"Both of you, hurry!"

The impostor wore a flustered expression, but she nonetheless continued her spell. As we ducked through the broken door and sprinted through the empty room toward the stairs, I chanted the next spell.

Crash! A loud noise sounded, though I didn't know what it was. Ignore it!

"Windy Shield!"

I slammed the spell into the room above before rushing up the stairs in one go. It was a spell that launched compressed air to create a shockwave from strong winds; it had almost no killing power, but if there were enemies in the room above, it could stop their movements for a moment. As it turned out, there was no one in that room either.

"Naga-san!"

When I turned around at "her" voice, sure enough, Naga was nowhere to be seen!

"Naga!"

When I looked down from the stairs—lo and behold! Whether she had tripped over a chair and fallen or what, she was still in that room, pinned under a table, shouting all sorts of nonsense!

"Naga!"

The moment I shouted—flames filled my vision.

Reflexively pulling back, tongues of fire flared up right before my eyes and then vanished.

"...Naga..." I flopped down on the spot.

The heat of an exploding Fireball is enough to melt iron if used by an expert. To be caught in those flames...

"...She was a strange person... but a good person... well, she wasn't a good person either... anyway, to die in a place like this..."

At my soft mutter, that stupid laugh suddenly echoed!

"Ho-ho-ho-ho! Naive, how naive, Lina Inverse!"

A black shadow appeared, coming up the stairs!

"Naga! You're alive!?"

"...What's with that 'I wish you weren't' look on your face..."

"It's just your imagination. More importantly, how?"

"Hmph. Firepower of that level cannot crush my courage!"

...No, it's not about courage...

"Amazing! Naga-san!" With moist eyes, "she" hugged Naga tightly.

"Yes! As long as one does not forget courage and hope, justice will always prevail! You have just proven that with your own body!"

POINTING TOWARD THE HORIZON AGAIN, with the brilliant morning sun at her back.

"...Um, actually..."

"Now! The target is right there! There is nothing to fear! Heaven and justice are on our side!"

After saying all she wanted, she quickly headed to the next room.

"...Setting aside love and courage, how exactly did you get through that?" I whispered to Naga.

"I used a fire resistance spell."

I see. It seemed she had been chanting a spell when she was making a fuss under the table. However, to withstand that much fire and be able to chant it in that short amount of time, it must have been a very high-level original spell...

"—Wait a minute, Naga. Didn't you have major burns from being caught in fire when we first met?"

"D-don't mention that... I learned from that experience and mastered this spell."

"Heeh! Naga, that's amazing!" I was truly impressed. "Even you can reflect on things and grow!"

Despite my rare compliment, Naga grimaced for some reason. "You... how exactly do you see me?"

"Like this."

I honestly stared at her with my coldest, most judging eyes.

And so, the time for the final battle came. Inside a room that took up the entire top floor of the tower (though it wasn't actually that big). The three of us stood face-to-face with the impostor, glaring at each other. It seemed this was the impostor's living quarters; there was a small table, a shelf for liquor, and a single bed in the corner of the room.

"...Hmph... I'm impressed you made it this far... I'll give you that much."

Despite the impostor's words, her face clearly showed signs of panic.

"It's nothing worth praising. It's just that the opponents were too weak," I said casually.

"An impostor is an impostor after all, I suppose." At "her" words, the impostor's face turned beet red.

"I won't stand for you calling this Lina-sama an impostor!"

...Ugh, I really wish you'd stop saying "I'm Lina Inverse" with that appearance...

"No matter what you say, you are just an impostor. Because—"

At this point, "she" pointed sharply toward me. "...Because the real one is right here!"

If that had been the development, I would have been impressed, thinking "Oh!" ...But lo and behold, she clearly said this:

"Because I am the real Lina Inverse!"

...Whaat!?

"Wh-what are you talking about! I'm the real one!" The impostor began to chant a spell while showing clear signs of confusion. "She" also began her incantation to counter it.

It wasn't a very large space. Naturally, large-scale spells couldn't be used, and eventually, a pathetically small-scale magical battle unfolded between "her" and the impostor. Naga and I just stood there dazed, watching the course of events with blank expressions.

"...What... did she just say? Her." I found myself asking Naga.

"...It seems she said 'I'm the real Lina'..."

Perhaps this was her tactic to rattle the impostor.

"—At any rate, let's just finish this up." I managed to regain my composure and began chanting an attack spell.

The battle had reached a point where the impostor was deflecting "her" Flare Arrows with a wind barrier.

"Vibration Blast!"

The spell I released was momentarily caught in the impostor's wind barrier and landed on the floor.

"Ha-ha! Where are you aiming!"

Ignoring the nonsense, I fired another one! It landed on the floor just like the first one. Exactly where I aimed.

Crash! Before she even had time to shout, the impostor was swallowed by the collapsing floor and fell to the floor below. I didn't miss this opportunity and

immediately moved to my next action. After a brief moment, the impostor's voice came from below.

"Y-you've done it now... but this much is—KYAAAAAA!"

Thud.

Apparently, the table I had kicked down had scored a direct hit.

"Ah, hey, Naga, help me out. I'm going to drop that liquor shelf too."

"No. That would be a waste of liquor. Let's drop that bed over there instead."

"Ooh, that's a nice one."

"...Um... isn't that a bit too extreme..."

"Well then, I shall take my leave now."

"She" said this on the way back to the village.

"Eh? What about the reward?" To Naga's question, she shook her head.

"No... originally, I did this to clear an unearned stigma, and you two have been a great help. It's enough if you tell the villagers that the person was indeed an impostor."

Apparently, "her" "I am the real one" statement hadn't been just a spur-of-the-moment tactic. However, she didn't look like the kind of person who would intentionally deceive others...

"I'll certainly pass that on, but..." I couldn't help but ask a mean-spirited question. "Are you really the real Lina Inverse?"

"—My real name is Liina Sunverse."

Pfft! Both Naga and I burst out laughing at the same time. Ignoring us, "she" continued.

"That 'Lina Inverse' is just a corrupted version of this name. Because I've been traveling as an adventurer despite being a woman, I've become more famous than necessary."

...It was a case of absolute and complete self-importance and assumption.

"The rumors have grown as well. When I punished two bandit groups before, the rumors said there were hundreds of them. Or there are stories about me helping a girl

avenge her brother, or fighting at the request of a king whose castle was stolen by a sorcerer—stories about things I haven't even done are coming out."

...When the stories are that different, you'd usually think, "That's strange." Normally.

"Well then, I'm off. We may meet again."

With those words, "she" turned on her heel and departed toward the sunset.

—Likely, she will continue to live her life firmly believing that the stories of the incidents I handled are rumors about her.

"—But that person—" Naga said in a quiet tone. "She has a name like a knock-off brand product..."

Keeping my eyes on the direction she had gone, I could only nod in silence.

(The Lina Elimination Order: End)

The Child

"…With that, I shall conclude my lecture. I am Lina Inverse."

As I bowed, the hall filled with a thunderous wave of applause.
I was at the Sorcerers' Association in a certain town. I had stopped by thinking there might be someone from my hometown, and as luck would have it, the Council Chairman happened to be there and asked me to hold a seminar for the apprentice sorcerers.
I jumped at the chance without a second thought. I was getting a bit exhausted from wandering around in this sweltering heat—which made me want to kick every passerby I saw—accompanied by a female sorceress who let out a high-pitched laugh at every opportunity, all while tackling troublesome, zero-profit requests that seemed to pour in from nowhere.
Compared to that, this job offered decent pay, and more importantly, the regional headquarters and the dormitory were fully equipped with air conditioning via minor chilling spells at all times! I would have been a fool not to take it.
And so, I spent the last few days lecturing those aspiring to be sorcerers, and today, I successfully completed the five-day schedule. To be honest, giving a magic lecture to beginners is quite difficult. I could have taught them in a way that would let them use something like "Flare Arrow" immediately, but if there were any reckless, thrill-seeking idiots in the bunch, it would lead to disaster.
On the other hand, if I focused only on ethics, they wouldn't even know what kind of lecture it was. If I talked about abstract theories, it might be profound for a veteran, but for a beginner, it would just be confusing and boring. Whether my lecture was a success or not was written in the sound of this almost deafening applause.
With a slightly heavier purse and a heart full of satisfaction, I left the Sorcerers' Association building. Well, if it had ended there, it would have been just a simple story...
"Hey. Big sis."
He called out to me while Naga and I were scarfing down lunch at a diner in the lower district. If the person calling out like that had been some sleazy-faced guy, I would have floored him before the extra brown tea I just ordered even arrived... but standing before me was a cute boy, barely ten years old.
He had straight, short-cropped blond hair and light green eyes. His features were so well-defined that a middle-aged man with dangerous hobbies would probably start

drooling just looking at him... that’s a bit of a crude way to put it, though. He was wearing a grey, knee-length mantle etched with ritual sigils. The classic apprentice sorcerer style. He was a kid I recognized.
"Oh? You are..."
"An acquaintance?" Naga asked, draining a mug of brandy without changing her expression.
"I’m pretty sure he was at the seminar..."
"Yeah. I'm Clay," he answered with heaps of energy.
I didn't know his name, but I remembered him because he had asked some pretty sharp questions despite his bratty attitude.
"Big sis, your lecture was awesome. I was really impressed."
"Well, it wasn't that big a deal," I said, trying to act humble while biting into some mutton stew.
"See, in the future, I wanna be a great sorcerer who can blow away monsters or dragons in a single shot."
Saying it is easy enough. However, setting dragons aside, the strength of the monster race is almost beyond measure. That said, there was no need for me to sit here and lecture him on the terrors of the monster race just to crush a young boy's dream.
The boy scurried around and sat down next to me.
"But, ya know, for stuff like that, besides knowledge and talent, you definitely need experience, right?" He took a sip of my freshly delivered brown tea without asking.
"So, I’ve decided."
"...Decided what?"
"I’m gonna be your apprentice."
Pffft!
I accidentally spat out my drink.
"Hyaaaaaa!"
"Dewawawawawa! That’s gross!"
Naga and Clay both let out exaggerated screams. He hurriedly used a handkerchief to wipe the milk—mixed with tiny bits of meat and vegetables—off his face.
"Wh-What did you just say!?"
"Like I said, I said I'm gonna be your apprentice."
"Kid... becoming Lina’s apprentice... you should value your life more," Naga chimed in.
"What’s that supposed to mean, Naga...?" I gave her a flat look, but she remained perfectly composed.
"It means exactly what I said."
...It’s a bit sad that I couldn't find a comeback for that. I turned my attention back to Clay.
"Listen, do you even know what you’re saying? Becoming a sorcerer’s apprentice means being forced to do things that are common-sense impossibilities under the guise of 'trials.' If you fail, it ends with 'I guess you didn't have what it takes,' and if you luckily succeed, you’re kicked out with 'I have nothing left to teach you'!"
"...Is that how it works?"
"That’s how it is! That’s how the world works!"

"Even so, I definitely wanna become a Great Sorcerer! Someone who makes the legendary Lei Magnus look like a joke!"
Becoming a great sorcerer is fine and all, but him becoming my apprentice of his own volition was a problem. For one thing, I can't go about my hobby of bullying bandits with a kid in tow.
"Ho-ho-ho-ho! You've certainly taken a liking to her, Lina Inverse. You two look quite good together, child to child."
That ticked me off. Before I could argue, Clay stared her down from the front.
"Cow-boob lady, shut up. I'm talking to the flat-chested sis right now."
"Cow..."
"Flat..."
Whack!
Naga and my attacks showed a magnificent display of coordination.
"I am Naga-oneesan."
"I'm Lina. Now, say it, Clay."
"…Ubuubuu… I'm thorry… you're both beautiful thith-sters…"
There, there. He became much more honest. Kids really do need an education.
"Anyway, Clay, I have no intention of taking an apprentice."
"Don't say that. Even if your mouth says that, your body is honest."
"...Where did you learn a line like that?"
"My dad says it sometimes. He says when you want a girl to listen to you, that's what you should say."
...Don't teach kids weird things.
"Big sis, I'm beggin' ya!"
"....."
"I won't get in the way!"
We were in a sparsely populated part of the lower district. He had been persistently tailing us for a while now, being a huge nuisance the whole time. I wanted to lose him, but the nimbleness of a child isn't something to be underestimated. I thought about just leaving town with a straight face, but if he kept following us, we'd technically be kidnappers. Every time we headed toward the Sorcerers' Association to hand him over to a guardian, he'd vanish, only to reappear from nowhere the moment we moved away.
So, we were forced to just wander around town aimlessly.
"Hey, big sis."
"....."
"Hey, at least answer me!"
"Listen..." Without turning back to the kid scurrying behind us, I spoke in a dismissive tone. "Listen, Clay. You talk about apprenticeship so easily, but have you even talked to your parents or the Sorcerers' Association?"
"...Well... no... not yet... but if the apprenticeship was a go, I thought I'd have you help me persuade them..."
He was a rather gutless kid.
"If you can't even persuade your own parents, you're a billion years too early to be a sorcerer's apprentice. I think I mentioned this in the lecture, but in magic, while

talent matters, theoretical construction is a massive factor. You have to be able to theorize what you believe is right and make it persuasive to others. If you can't do that, you'll never create an original spell, and no matter how many memorized incantations you can use, you can't be called a true Great Sorcerer."
"Mugu..."
"...Hey, Lina..."
"Naga, stay out of this. It’s better to be a bit harsh. Besides, becoming someone’s apprentice is something you do after you've absorbed everything the Association can teach you and still feel it’s not enough. No matter how famous a sorcerer you apprentice under, if you're unskilled, you'll just end up unable to keep up."
"...Um, Lina..."
"And besides, the true goal of a sorcerer lies in the pursuit of something. Spells were originally just a means to that end."
"...That's why, Lina..."
"Daaaah! I told you to stay out of—wait, huh?"
When I shouted and turned around, Clay was gone.
"...Did he go home? Did he give up?"
At my words, Naga shook her head.
"No. Just now, some weird guys threw a big burlap sack over him and took him away by force."
"Wh-What! That’s a total kidnapping!"
Naga struck a pose for no reason.
"Hmph. Actually, I thought that might be the case. I hear that happens a lot around here."
"Then why didn't you tell me!?"
"Why didn't you try to listen!?"
……
"A-Anyway! Now that it’s come to this, we have to save that kid ourselves!"
"Heeh... how unlike you... taking the initiative to do something that won't even make you money."
"It's not a matter of money!" I said indignantly. "Plenty of people must have seen that kid following us! I’d love to just leave, but if I do, everyone will misunderstand and think we’re the kidnappers!"
"...So in the end, it’s still about self-interest..."
"...It should have been around this way."
"Are you absolutely sure!?" I cast a suspicious glance at Naga.
I was trusting her word and searching the area where the men who snatched Clay had disappeared... but the dark, filthy backstreets were filled with a faint, sour smell and almost no foot traffic.
"Let's ask that old guy over there."
I spotted an old man rummaging through a pile of bulky trash at the edge of the road, and Naga and I approached him.
"Excuse me. I’d like to ask you something."
"Did some men carrying a large, moving burlap sack pass through here just now?"

"Hmm?" The old man looked up, scanning us with the same eyes he used to pick through trash. A small sneer curled his lip. "Listen here, young misses. When you ask someone for a favor, you gotta give a little something in return..."
"Naga Bash!"
"Inverse Crash!"
Whack! Thump!
"Excuse me. I'd like to ask you something."
"Did some men carrying a large, moving burlap sack pass through here just now?"
"I-I was wrong! I'll tell you anything, just have mercy...!"
This is what happens when people say stupid things while I'm already irritated.

"Heh heh heh. That went well, boss."
"Damn straight. Once we get the ransom, we can live easy for the rest of our lives."
The people uttering these lines—which sounded like something out of a badly written bard's ballad—were, of course, the duo that kidnapped Clay. After a few twists and turns, we found their hideout quite easily. It was likely thanks to the fact that not much time had passed since the incident and the results of a very rational investigative interrogation. Their hideout was on the second floor of a multi-tenant apartment caked in soot and dust.
Now, where exactly were we observing them from? Well, we were outside the window. After locating the building, I blended into the shadows and checked every room from the outside using a detection spell, and now I was hovering outside the window using levitation. By the way, Naga, who couldn't use levitation (she probably just couldn't be bothered to learn it), had been hauled up by me and was currently clinging to a ledge or a ventilation duct or something. It looked quite pathetic from the side, but it couldn't be helped.
I could have rescued him immediately, but it goes without saying that if Naga and I really cut loose, we'd cause massive damage to the surroundings. Plus, well, I figured this could be a bit of a "trial" for Clay (lol).
"...So, brat, whose kid are you anyway?"
Inside the dim and grimy room, the man who looked like the leader—trying to act cool but just looking pathetic—asked Clay, who was tied to a chair. Judging by the dialogue, it wasn't a planned job; they had just kidnapped someone at random.
"Hmph! As if I'd tell villains like you!"
"Heh heh. You hear that, boss?" The chubby subordinate, who looked like he didn't have two brain cells to rub together, let out a nasty grin. "Looks like this kid doesn't know his place..."
The man cracked his knuckles with a similar grin.
"Ah! I'm thorry! You're both cool big brotherth!"
...He had a big attitude but a tiny heart.
"So? I'll ask again. Where is your house?"
"...Maars Street... Number twelve..."
"...Maars Street? You live in a nice place."

"—Wait!? Maars Street Number Twelve... you brat, are you Jagan's kid!?"
"...Yeah..."
"You know him, boss?" The subordinate asked in a dopy voice as the leader let out a cry of shock.
"You idiot! Jagan of Maars Street... that's the Chairman of the Sorcerers' Association!"
"Whaaaaaaaaaaat!?"
I accidentally let out an incredibly loud shout.
"What was that!?"
"It came from outside the window!"
The room suddenly became noisy. Crap! I hurriedly floated up and hid in the darkness of the building created by the setting sun.
...Ah. I forgot Naga. She was still clinging to the outside of the window in an unnatural pose. If the men peeked out the window to look around, she'd be found instantly. Naga showed a flash of panic on her face, and then...
"...Meow... meow..."
...What good is imitating a cat now?
And so, there were now two prisoners.
"Ho-ho-ho-ho! Don't think for a second that something like this has stripped Naga the White Serpent of her freedom! In the first place, such a—"
"Boss, what is this woman?"
"I... I don't know... Based on her outfit, she looks like a pervert, but I don't think a pervert would be out there imitating a cat..."
The two kidnappers whispered to each other, looking at Naga with creeped-out eyes as she continued to laugh loudly while tied to a chair. Bewildered by her suspicious appearance, the idea that she was someone who came to rescue Clay didn't seem to occur to them. The reason Naga was staying quiet—well, relatively—was that I had signaled her "STOP" from outside the window when she looked like she was about to go wild upon being brought inside.
I had devised a peaceful and perfect plan—incredible, even to me—where I would sneak in after the men fell asleep, rescue the two, and then notify the guards to have them arrested. ...And besides, since we were here, it was probably best to teach Clay that if he became my apprentice, things like this would happen on a daily basis.
Eventually, the sun set and darkness descended upon the town. The kidnapping duo discussed various plans for collecting the ransom, but they eventually began to yawn, seemingly tired. Naga and Clay had completely forgotten their positions as prisoners and were sleeping peacefully while tied to their chairs.
...It felt a bit silly that I was the only one taking this seriously, but I couldn't just leave them both behind.
"Alright, boss, let's call that the plan. Let's get some sleep for today."
"Yeah... it's a bit much for us to be rubbing our sleepy eyes and talking while the hostages are out cold..."
"But seriously, who was that woman? All she did was laugh."
"Who knows... it's definitely smarter not to get involved with her..."
Correct.
"Well, we can figure out what to do with her tomorrow. Let's sleep."

"Right."
Up to this point, everything was going according to plan. However, a completely unexpected factor tore a massive rift in my meticulous and perfect plan at that very moment. Yes—the man closed the window and locked it.
In the end, it turned into a forced entry.
"Vibration Blast!"
Boom! The wooden window blew away spectacularly with a loud crash. Even so, to prevent the two from being used as shields, I had waited a bit before deciding to burst in.
"What! What was that!?"
"Could it be those two...!"
The back room suddenly became frantic. And the two people in question—were still sleeping.
"Naga! Wake up!" I whispered as I kicked her in the side of the head.
That finally woke her up.
"Wh... What do you think you're doing! You!"
"It's your fault for sleeping forever!" I said, cutting her ropes with a short sword.
"Anyway, we're escaping! I'll floor those guys, so you take care of Clay!"
"Got it!"
Just as I handed the short sword to Naga, the inner door swung open. Standing against the faint light of a lamp were the two villains.
"Who the hell are you!?"
"A suspicious person!"
My blunt declaration momentarily froze the two in their tracks. When people are faced with a completely unexpected reaction, they tend to hesitate for a second.
Taking advantage of that opening, I began to chant.
"This bitch... you're making fun of us!"
The moment the subordinate shouted in anger, my spell was complete.
"Windy Shield!"
It was a spell that merely stirred up a strong wind, but if used correctly in a near-enclosed space like this, it could knock people over.
"Dewaah!"
"…A sorcerer…!"
"Now! Naga! Clay!"
I grabbed the two and leaped out the window. Of course, I had levitation active. All that was left was to knock those two out. Just as I thought that, Naga suddenly chanted a spell and surrounded us all in a wind barrier while we were in mid-air.
"What are you doing all of a sudden—"
Before I could finish, a flash and a roar, followed by heat and impact, struck us!
"What...!?"
Turning my gaze, I saw the two villains. They were floating in the air just like us.
"Don't go thinking you're the only magic users around," the leader sneered.
I see. The explosion just now was likely a small Fireball or something released by one of them. Naga had sensed it quickly and protected us with the wind barrier. These

two, despite acting like "Generic Villain A" and "Generic Villain B," were quite skilled to suddenly launch a magical attack.
But the problem now was Clay. I had the confidence not to lose to these two, and Naga wasn't the type to be bothered by getting hit by a hundred or two hundred thousand Fireballs. But Clay, even if he was an apprentice, likely couldn't use any spells that were useful in actual combat. If we brought him into the fight, he'd just be in the way, but if I left him somewhere alone, there was a high risk he'd be caught and used as a shield again.
Excluding the option of running away, there was only one choice. I ascended and set Naga and Clay down on the roof of the apartment building.
"Naga, take care of him. Clay, watch closely."
"…Yeah… good luck, big sis." He nodded, rubbing his eyes as if he were still sleepy.
I told Naga to absolutely refrain from providing magical support (because I was afraid of getting caught in it) and leaped back into the air.
"You plan to fight us alone?"
"One person is more than enough for the likes of you."
I answered the subordinate's sneer with my own.
"Damn it, so cocky... Boss, let's kill her!"
The leader nodded and fired a Flare Arrow at me. It seemed the subordinate was handling the levitation control while the leader was in charge of the attacks. I dodged it easily. Prioritizing maneuverability in aerial combat, I was using a high-speed flight spell rather than simple levitation. I didn't even really have to dodge; the wind barrier around me would have easily deflected a Flare Arrow, but getting a direct hit still doesn't feel great.
Now it was my turn. Since I was controlling my flight, I couldn't use any massive techniques.
"Vibration Blast!"
"Windy Shield!"
What!? My Vibration Blast was deflected just before it reached the duo.
Windy Shield—a spell that makes compressed air burst at a chosen location. It's weaker than the similar Blast Bomb, and a direct hit feels only like being punched, but it's perfect for blowing away an opponent's minor tricks, just like it did now. In fact, that's exactly why the spell was developed. This guy, despite using basic spells, seemed to know how to use them for both offense and defense.
Truth be told, these kinds of opponents are actually quite troublesome. Someone who is purely offensive or defensive isn't that scary. If I landed and used a reasonably large technique, it would be over in an instant, but doing that here would spectacularly destroy the surrounding apartments. In that case...
I flew around the duo, dodging their attacks while occasionally launching minor tricks of my own. I gradually decreased the number of attacks, eventually turning entirely to defense...
"Kuh!"
I suddenly turned my back and retreated from the battlefield.
"You're not getting away!"
The leader stopped the eager subordinate. "Wait!"

"Why!? She's right there!"
"That's just her acting! Listen, she’s a pro! If you follow her blindly, she’ll lure you to an open space and finish you with a big spell!"
"...B-but boss..."
"What!?"
"She... she really ran away..."
"Eh?"
The two of them stared blankly in the direction I had flown. At that moment—my tackle from behind connected perfectly.
It was nothing special. After turning the corner, I just went around the building and came up behind them. Naturally, I had anticipated the leader would read my actions as a lure and launched a surprise attack.
"Dawaaaaaaah!"
Whack.
The shock caused the subordinate to lose his grip, and the leader, losing his levitation control, fell straight down and stopped moving. It wasn't that high, so he likely just lost consciousness. One left.
"Y-you... how dare you do that to the boss...!"
He was desperately trying to act tough, but he couldn't hide his fear. He retreated slowly with his sluggish levitation—and at that moment, a shadow sliced through the void!
Wham!
Performing the feat of jumping off the roof of a four-story apartment and kicking the subordinate was, surprisingly, Clay.
"Clay!"
I hurriedly landed and ran to Clay, who had fallen on the ground. The subordinate was out cold. He wouldn't be waking up for a while. Fortunately, Clay wasn't injured.
"…Big sithhhhhhh! I was thooo thcardeeeeee!"
He clung to me while crying. Even if he talked big, he was still just a kid. I gently stroked his head.
"…It’s okay now. Evil has been defeated. But listen, Clay, even if it was to help me, don't ever do a dynamic jump kick like that again. It’s dangerous."
At my words, he shook his head violently.
"…No… that cow-boob sis told me to do some kind of trick, and then she kicked me off…"
He pointed toward the distance where, of course, Naga was laughing toward the moonlight. ...What on earth is she doing...
"…Listen, Clay. A traveling sorcerer always has to do this kind of work. In other words, you can't survive without a certain level of skill. You understand, right?"
He nodded firmly. I looked at the two villains lying on the street.
"And besides, no matter how much magic you can use, without a righteous heart, it just becomes a dangerous power."
For some reason, he looked back and forth between Naga and me, and then nodded very deeply.

"If you understand that, then that’s enough." I placed my hands on his shoulders and said, "There is nothing more I can teach you."
And so, the incident was resolved more or less peacefully. Having witnessed Naga and my actions firsthand, Clay gave up on being my apprentice and returned home quietly. According to a follow-up investigation Naga did (though I have no idea how she did it), Clay apparently started to strangely dislike the idea of becoming a sorcerer after that, and is currently having a huge argument with his father.
All’s well that ends well (wait, what is well about all that!?)

(The Child: End)

Little Princess 2

"Someone! Somebody help me!" The frantic voice of an old man reached my ears just as the highway began to cut into the forest.

"It’s no use, old man. No one’s coming for you!" A vulgar male voice followed.

If I were just some spineless, ordinary person, I probably would have pretended I didn't hear a thing. But I, Lina Inverse, am a bit different. Without a second thought, I dashed toward the source of the voices.

I figured a traveler was being ambushed by bandits or something. Which meant—if I saved them, I could squeeze them for all the reward money they were worth!

From the sound of it, the scene was close. —There!

An old man with snow-white hair was slumped on the ground. Walking toward him with a naked blade in hand was a man who looked every bit the bandit—bad attitude, bad face, and even worse manners. Beyond them, a young girl was struggling against two other bandit-looking types.

"That’s enough!" As I shouted, I lunged for the nearest man.

"Wh—what?!" The man hurriedly raised his sword. I drew my short sword from my hip with both hands and charged in without slowing my pace.

Clang! The moment our two blades locked head-on with a sharp ring, I used that point as a pivot and spun my body half a turn. I slipped inside his guard, positioning myself as if I were about to give him a piggyback ride—

"Heave-ho!" I let go of my sword's hilt with my right hand and slammed my elbow upward into the man's jaw.

The man let out a groan, arched backward, and keeled over just like that. Child's play. He had the skills of a common thug you'd find rolling around in any random town.

"Don't move!" I shifted my gaze toward the voice and— Crap!

The other two men had the girl in a horizontal hold, a sword pressed against her throat. It was a cliché, but an effective move.

"Help me!" The girl screamed. She was petite with blonde hair... wait, huh?!

"You! One move and the girl's life is forfeit!" Ignoring the man spewing the textbook villain lines, I charged toward the three of them with a fierce dash anyway!

"H—hey! I said don't move...!" The man started panicking big time. Like I care!

"How dare you crawl out in front of me again!" My jumping kick connected beautifully with the hostage—

Right into Lemmy's face.

"I... I am so sorry... it was just, you know... my foot slipped..." In a small, nameless village along the Blue Highway.

I was busy bowing my head in a frantic apology at a corner table in a diner. To Miss Lemmy, of course. The real one.

Now, keep this between us, but a while back, I had been dragged through the wringer by a fake version of her. Because of that, I'd mistakenly thought she was the impostor and delivered a kick as a "light greeting"...

But as it turned out, she was the genuine Princess Lemmy. Hah, what a laugh. Normally, you'd think a big laugh would smooth everything over (or so I thought), but in this case, things were tricky. She was, after all, the daughter of a lord, and she had an attendant with her.

And that attendant was the one currently exploding in rage. "You think a 'sorry' is going to cut it?!" The old man shouted, blue veins throbbing on his forehead. As a travel companion, he looked incredibly unreliable, but apparently, he was her servant.

As for Lemmy herself, she remained seated across the table, fiddling with a rose in her right hand. She was probably trying to strike a pose, but with a distinct footprint clearly stamped on the right side of her face, she just looked hilarious.

Also, likely as a camouflage, neither of them was wearing particularly nice clothes.

"The one you kicked is the daughter of Duke Tradia, who holds territory granted by the Grand King himself! And you hit her in the face! If this footprint doesn't fade, Lady Lemmy... Lady Lemmy... will have to spend the rest of her life with such an 'amusing' face!"

"...Sorry about that. For having an 'amusing face'..." Lemmy muttered with dead eyes, causing the old man to bow his head frantically.

"M—my apologies! This Cranbe's tongue slipped! Please, forgive me!"

"It's fine. More importantly, let this person off. And please don't shout 'Princess, Princess' so loudly. This is supposed to be a low-profile journey."

"Ha... as you wish." *Score*. Looks like I'm off the hook.

"Geez, I really am sorry, Princess." I bowed with mock humility. I was entirely in the wrong here, so I had to play along.

"By the way... from what I can see, you appear to be a sorceress..." I nodded at her words.

"I thought so... I was right."

"Well, even a cat could tell that much just by looking."

"...Old man..."

"Oho! Another slip of the tongue!" After a small cough, she spoke in a more formal tone.

"I saw how you handled those three earlier; your skill is quite formidable. That being the case, I have a personal request to ask of you..." As she spoke, she nonchalantly tossed the rose in her right hand under the table.

"Right..." I had a feeling I wasn't going to like this, but since my boot print was still on her face, I couldn't exactly turn her down flat.

"Actually, I would like you to serve as our guard."

"A guard?" I blurted out.

"A guard...? If you needed something like that, shouldn't you have brought official soldiers from the start?" *Assuming you really are the real Princess Lemmy, that is,* I added in my head.

Just because she had an attendant didn't mean she was the real deal. There was always the possibility the attendant was a fake too. Well, without any proof or reason to doubt her, I had to treat her as the real thing for now, but it seemed contradictory to bring no soldiers yet want to hire a guard.

"Sigh... I would have preferred to do that if I could... but I am ashamed to say our territory's economic situation is quite dire..."

"P—Princess! Spouting such things so freely..."

"It is fine, old man. It's necessary for her to understand the circumstances." The old man tried to stop her, but she continued regardless. Still... whatever drama they had going on wasn't my problem.

She pulled a leafless rose from under the table with her left hand. "You may have heard the rumors, but a while ago, an ambitious minister in our territory caused quite a bit of trouble..."

I know, I know.

"Because of the strange stone golems he unleashed, the town suffered immense damage. To rebuild, our financial resources have been completely exhausted..."

Gulp!

W—Wait... could it be... maybe... no, definitely...

"W—Well... that sounds like quite the ordeal... haha..." I said with a twitching smile, sweat pouring down my face like a waterfall. ...Damn it. That Naga... vanishing at the perfect time...

"Yes... the minister kept playing dumb until the very end, saying 'I didn't do it' and all that... Anyway, we ran out of money to pay the soldiers' salaries, and the only one

left in the castle is this old man who has served us for years. Even I, a princess, have had to take up a part-time job making artificial flowers... *sob, sniffle*..."

As she spoke, she took a leaf from somewhere and started fastening it to the rose with green tape. ...I... I see...

The old man placed a gentle hand on the shoulder of the weeping Lemmy. "Princess... you mustn't cry. Crying won't change the fact that poor is poor."

"...Are you trying to pick a fight with me...?"

"N—Not at all! My apologies! My tongue slipped again!" *This old guy... could it be he's only stayed because there's nowhere else to get hired if he quits the castle?*

"Regardless, we still can't make ends meet..." Well, obviously. Where in the world is there a part-time job making fake flowers that can cover a regional budget?

"Out of desperation, we are on our way to see Duke McGarrell of Figaro City, who is a relative, to ask for a loan... *sniffle*..."

"I... I see, that’s rough." While trying my best to act calm, I nodded repeatedly.

"So! Please, I beg you! Right now... we have nothing to pay you with, but once we secure the funds, we will pay you back for sure! If you’re not satisfied, I’ll give you a shoulder rub! I’ll brew you tea! You can even call me your dog!"

"Princess... you've become remarkably humble..."

"Old man! Stop crying and bow your head too!"

"*Sniffle*..." "*Sniffle*..."

Of course—there was no way I could turn down this request.

The journey was relatively smooth. Princess Lemmy got caught twice for dine-and-dashing, Cranbe’s tongue slipped and caused about six scuffles with thugs, and we were ambushed by bandits once, but there’s no need to go into the details of all that.

Thus, the three of us arrived at Figaro City without any major trouble. The town’s scale was about the same as, or perhaps slightly larger than, Tyrell City, where I’d stopped before. But somehow... how should I put it, the air felt stagnant.

Compared to the worn-out atmosphere and appearance of the downtown area, the mansions near the castle were incredibly luxurious. Simply put, the gap between rich and poor was massive. In towns like this, the lord is usually loaded.

Anyway, our group didn't even make any stops upon entering town; we headed straight for the castle. The reality was that Lemmy didn't have the financial leeway to make stops, though.

"Halt!" "Who goes there?!" Two sentries blocked our path at the castle entrance. Lemmy took a step forward and spoke in a dignified voice.

"I am Lemmy Ul Tradia, daughter of the Lord of Tyrell, Radius von Tradia!"

"Liar!" "....." The soldier dismissed her claim instantly, leaving her momentarily speechless.

"On what basis do you decide that?!" Cranbe shouted, blue veins popping on his forehead.

"Silence! Where would you ever find a suspicious princess entourage like this?!"

"What part of us is suspicious?!"

"Everything! There’s no way a princess would travel without a single guard and in such shabby clothing! And besides, I’ve never even heard a whisper about a Tradian princess coming here!"

"...Did you not contact them?! To say you were coming?" I whispered to Lemmy.

"Well! If we had the money to send a messenger, I wouldn't have been dine-and-dashing!" Fair point.

As we were bickering back and forth— "What's the matter! What is all this noise about!" A soldier emerged from the back. Judging by the gold braid on his armor and his gaudy decorations, he was likely an officer or a member of the royal guard. He was a sturdy man with short-cropped hair and a square jaw.

"C—Captain Barrel..." One of the soldiers looked at the man with a troubled expression. He started to say something, but I beat him to it.

"Captain, you haven't trained your subordinates very well."

"...Who is this? This girl with a big attitude despite having a chest and back that are both flat?" *Twitch*.

"Uh... well, they claim to be the princess's entourage from Tyrell..."

"Hmph." Laughing at his subordinate’s words, Barrel pulled a few copper coins from his pocket.

"Idiots. Can't you tell just by looking?! They’re obviously just beggars. If we took every person like this seriously, we’d never have enough time. The best way to deal with this sort is to throw them some pocket change and send them packing. Remember that! —Here, take this charity and get lost already!" He tossed the copper coins at our feet.

"Don't mock us..."

"—Did you say something? Little girl." Whether he heard me or not, he looked at me with a mocking expression.

"I said, don't mock us! Scattering a few measly copper coins and thinking you can trample over someone’s position, pride, and character—I don't like it! And Lemmy! Please don't pick up the coins that guy threw! It's pathetic!"

"Lina..."

"What."

"I don't think you have much persuasive power while you're picking up the coins yourself..."

...Oops! "No, this was just... even copper is money! You shouldn't waste it for no reason! ...Anyway! Lemmy! Don't you have anything to prove who you are?!"

"Now that you mention it, I have a letter I received from my father." ...Get it out then. Those are the kinds of things you show first.

She rummaged through her box of artificial roses. "Let's see... not this, not that... huh? It was definitely in here... did I sell it to a junk shop to cover travel expenses...?" ...Hey...

"Found it, found it! Here it is! Oh right. I was using it as a glue stand for making the roses!" .....I have no words...

She handed the letter, now stiff with glue, to Captain Barrel. Naturally, I didn't return the copper coins I’d picked up.

"If you give this to Duke McGarrell, everything should be made clear."

"Is—Is it real?!" Barrel’s face went pale. He still seemed half-skeptical.

"I—I'll check it, just in case..." As he reached out to open it, I spoke up.

"Heh. I hope you're prepared."

"W—What do you mean?!"

"A captain opening and reading a letter from one lord to another on his own authority. —Well, I just hope you get off with a 'severe punishment'."

"Ugh..." His face grew even paler. "A—Anyway, you lot, wait here!" Leaving us with that, he took the letter and headed inside the castle.

We waited a while—actually, quite a long while. When Duke McGarrell finally came out to greet us, Captain Barrel was nowhere to be seen among the surrounding soldiers.

"My, my, please forgive the negligence of my men." Duke McGarrell said this with an expression that didn't seem all that apologetic.

We were in a secluded room in the castle. Nine people were seated at a table crowded with dishes. The three of us, Duke McGarrell, and his five sons. The Duke looked to be in his early forties. Not to be mean, but he was a scrawny, somewhat pathetic-looking guy, and the toothbrush mustache he’d grown to look more dignified only made him look more pitiful. His sons took after him, all having very mediocre faces.

Perhaps because of that—or maybe not—the dishes lined up on the table were all rather ordinary for a local lord’s hospitality. Compared to the gorgeous castle interior

and the Duke's own clothing, it was clear we weren't exactly being welcomed with open arms.

However, Lemmy and Cranbe didn't care about that at all. The two of them were simply staring at the array of food on the table, whispering to each other.

"Look, look, old man! There's dressing on the salad! So luxurious—"

"Ooh! To eat a fish larger than my palm... *sob*... it's been so long..."

"Is that... could it be chicken?! ...Oh... I want to pack it in a box and take it back for everyone..."

So... so pitiful... beyond words...

"A—Anyway, please eat before the food gets cold." The moment Duke McGarrell made the suggestion—it goes without saying that a savage battle for the food began.

"Still... to go so far as to send your only daughter as a messenger... your father must be in quite a bind." Once everyone had finally settled down, Duke McGarrell opened his mouth while fiddling with his pathetic mustache.

"Yes... I'm ashamed to say..." While blushing and answering, she was frantically stuffing fried chicken into her pockets. That is seriously embarrassing.

"I understand. The amount mentioned in your father’s letter... I will see what I can do to provide it." Given that he was talking about this in front of me, it seemed Duke McGarrell thought I was just Lemmy’s attendant in disguise.

"Really?!"

"Yes. I will give it to you. Not as a loan, you understand." He suddenly said something very generous. Wait... huh?

As I mentioned before, judging by the food, we didn't seem very welcome. It’s only natural since we showed up unannounced and asked for a huge loan. And yet, this offer was far too generous. Or perhaps I didn't know the amount written in the letter, but given Lemmy’s father, maybe it was something pathetic like "five silver coins if possible." ...Surely it wouldn't be that low...

"No, that won't do!" Cranbe, who had been wiping sauce off his plate with bread, raised his voice in protest.

"We truly appreciate the sentiment... it’s true that Tradia is in a tight spot right now. But no matter our blood relation, to receive such a large sum of money for nothing would bring dishonor to my master."

"I see... that may be true..." Duke McGarrell said with a troubled face. What a hassle. If it were me, I’d just say "thanks, I'll take it," but for a lord, things like face, pride, and reputation get in the way. Well, I suppose that’s unavoidable for someone in a position of leadership.

"That said, having once said I would 'give' it, I cannot very well turn around and say I will 'lend' it. ...Hmm... what should we do..." The Duke closed his eyes in thought for a moment.

"Hmm... then how about this? In any case, it will take some time to prepare that much money. During that time, I would like you to do something for me."

"Do something—meaning what?" To Lemmy’s question, the Duke replied with a troubled expression.

"That—I haven't thought of it yet..." Oh, come on.

"In short, I want you to perform some kind of task for me. As a reward, I will pay you. This way, both sides can save face."

"I see." Cranbe nodded deeply. "Understood. Then we shall graciously accept that offer."

The task Duke McGarrell gave us was incredibly simple. There was an old, small fortress by a lake far to the north. All we had to do was deliver a letter to an old man living there. Apparently, he was a former aide who was now retired.

As for the route to the lake, rumors said bandit groups used to appear frequently, but they had been wiped out by the Duke's orders. That meant a four-day round trip of pure boredom—or so it was supposed to be.

"Hold on a sec." I grabbed the back of Cranbe’s collar as he walked ahead. It was just past noon on the day we set out.

"W—What is it? So suddenly?"

"Could it be—?!" Lemmy looked at me with an expression of horror. "Did you drop your wallet?!" Is money the only thing on this woman's mind?

"No! I felt bloodlust!"

"Ho... you have a sharp intuition for a little girl." A muffled voice echoed around us.

"Why don't you come out? Or are you afraid of just three people despite having those numbers?"

"Hmph... you have a sharp tongue... fine, I'll come out as you wish! Men!" *Rustle*. Along with the voice, the surrounding trees stirred. And then— They came out, one after another, with a clatter. From a quick look, there were about twenty or thirty of them. The ones who emerged weren't the typical bandits. They were all fully armed in matching plate mail, carrying long swords, and wearing full-face helmets that covered everything but their eyes. Furthermore, the way they moved when they

appeared at the man’s signal was that of people who had received proper training. In plain terms: in my estimation, these guys were military.

"Hmph... I don't know what you're planning, but we don't have any money to give you!" Lemmy suddenly stepped forward and made a bold statement. Before, she literally had no money, but now she should have some travel funds given to her by Duke McGarrell.

"I’d rather apologize than give you any money!"

"No... apologizing won't help us..." The one who seemed to be the leader said with a troubled voice. "And besides, our goal isn't money. Instead—"

"You're going to say you want our lives, right?" I cut him off, but the man shook his head.

"No. We want you to hand over the letter you're carrying."

"Wh—How do you know about the letter?!" Cranbe shouted in surprise.

"I don't need to answer that." The man said bluntly. "If you hand it over quietly, I'll spare your lives. In fact, I wouldn't mind paying you for it."

"Here you go. The letter."

"Why are you handing it over with a smile?! Lemmy! We won't be able to get the money from the Duke!"

"Right, right. That kind of disloyalty is bad." The man nodded along with me for some reason.

"Oh... I see... right. I can't give you the letter."

"Hmph... then I have no choice. I thought I’d spare you if you gave it up quietly..."

"You... your story is all over the place."

"I'm not listening! Attack!" "Yeah!" At the command, the men all drew their swords at once. The blades shimmered in the midday sun.

"They were weak." "But they certainly were good at running away." "Seriously... they picked up the guys who couldn't move and vanished in an instant." That night, at an inn in a certain town. The topic over dinner was, of course, the attackers from earlier.

"But the problem is why they were targeting that letter—and how they knew we had it." Lemmy said, taking a bite of a fried crab claw.

"Maybe—we fell for it."

"What do you mean, Lina?" I swallowed the meat in my mouth. "First, about how they knew we had the letter: it's reasonable to assume there's a spy around Duke McGarrell. And—this is just a hypothesis, a brilliant deduction of mine..." I paused for a moment and lowered my tone. "First, Duke McGarrell was in a standoff with some country or lord—basically, on the brink of war."

"No way—" Lemmy’s voice lowered along with mine.

"And he wanted to get in touch with a certain person or organization, but he couldn't move easily under the 'enemy's' eyes. That’s when we showed up—"

"S—So the Duke used us as couriers?!" Cranbe leaned in.

"It's just a hypothesis. He might have figured outsiders could deceive the enemy, or maybe we were decoys and someone else is actually carrying the real letter... either

way, because of a spy inside, our faces and movements became known to the 'enemy'..."

"Could it be... but Duke McGarrell told us he would give us the money unconditionally at first."

"Hah. You're naive, Lemmy." I wagged my finger. "He probably figured that since you're representing another lord, you wouldn't just say 'Yay, lucky! Thanks!' and take it for free. He likely made that offer expecting you to turn it down. And besides, use some common sense. No matter if you're relatives or lords, do you really think he'd generously hand over enough money to rebuild a territory's finances just for delivering one ordinary letter? Even if you're relatives, you're not that close, right?"

"Ugh... hmm..." The two of them groaned in unison and fell into thought.

"Oh, but don't worry so much." I waved my hands dismissively. "Whatever the case, for us, it's just a matter of delivering the letter to the recipient."

"But..."

"It's fine. You have me with you. No matter how many of those guys come, it's no big deal."

"Hmm..." Lemmy and Cranbe still had worried faces. Well, they didn't know the extent of my power, so I guess it couldn't be helped.

"Still, Princess... regardless of the letter's contents or the Duke's true intentions, we can't turn back now."

"I know, but..."

"Then we must simply forge ahead! We should reach our destination by tomorrow afternoon. We might get attacked once more, but if we die, we die. You can just find someone like Master Flaon and adopt him as your heir."

"...Old man... is it just my imagination, or do I get incredibly irritated every time you open your mouth?"

"No, uh..."

"Hey, who is this Flaon guy?" At my question, Lemmy let go of Cranbe’s neck.

"He's my cousin. His parents passed away a long time ago... in our territory, he was the only person besides me who had the right to succeed as the next lord..." She answered with a somewhat lonely expression.

"Was?"

"I told you before that when my father was about to inherit his current position, the minister planned something treacherous."

"Yeah."

"At that time, the minister intended to push my father aside and set Flaon up as the lord, so he could rule in his name... but in reality, the minister would have been the one in control." A typical puppet government.

"Flaon himself wasn't involved in the matter, but once the minister's plan failed and things came to light, some people even started whispering, 'Maybe he was actually part of the minister's conspiracy'... eventually, he couldn't take it anymore, gave up his right of succession, and left the castle... It must have been hard for him. He was a sensitive person..." She spoke, her face turning slightly red. ...Oh?

"Cranbe, Cranbe." I whispered to the old man. "Could it be that Lemmy feels that way about this Flaon person...?"

"You hit the nail on the head. ...Though for him, he wouldn't even give a second look to a green brat like her..."

"...Old man..."

"O—Oho! You were listening! This Cranbe's tongue just slipped again!"

"You think a 'slipped tongue' is going to save you now?!" Thus, the life-and-death struggle between Lemmy and Cranbe continued until midnight.

The next day turned out contrary to my expectations. There were no ambushes like I'd thought, time passed peacefully, and our group reached the lake with surprising ease. But...

The old man was nowhere to be found at the fortress by the lake. Instead, a scrap of paper was lying there. *I have the old man. Five days from now, the three of you must come here with the letter. If you don't come, or if you return and report to Duke McGarrell, the old man's life is forfeit.*

And then—the day of the "promise" arrived. The blue lake rippled quietly, reflecting the soft afternoon sun. A part of the forest facing the lake opened up, revealing a stone fortress that stood there like a giant boulder. There was no sign of anyone around. It seemed our opponent hadn't arrived yet, or they were waiting for us inside.

"Well... shall we go?" I called out to Lemmy and Cranbe, who were hiding in the shadows of the trees.

"...Are we really going...?"

"Lina, how about we just boldly abandon this stranger of a hostage?" Cranbe suggested a radical idea. ...I don't necessarily hate that kind of thinking, but... That wouldn't solve the problem in this case.

"I told you! We already discussed this! If we just go home, we won't get the money, and since they've seen all our faces, we can't send a substitute. Which means we have no choice but to charge in from the front."

"Ugh... *sob*... I don't want to die so young..."

"Ugh... *sniffle*... I don't want to die a strange death at my age..." They were a stubborn bunch.

"Anyway, crying here won't solve anything. If we respond flexibly according to the situation, I'm sure things will work out."

"But... doesn't 'flexible' just mean 'making it up as you go'?" ...They caught on...

"In any case, let's go!" I said, stepping out from the bushes and walking boldly toward the fortress. Lemmy and Cranbe had no choice but to follow.

If we had sneaked in, it might have built some tension, but unfortunately, the trees around the fortress stopped, leaving nothing to hide behind. The other side was the lake. Of course, I thought of a plan where I'd use magic to launch a surprise attack from the lake by myself, but there was a risk we were being watched. If I did that, it'd be game over if they went after Lemmy and the others while I was busy. Which meant I had to somehow protect the two of them alone while rescuing the hostage... Thinking about it, it was quite a tall order... At this rate, I'd better ask for a higher fee... though Lemmy probably wouldn't pay...

But come to think of it, the enemy was being pretty careless. Since we had no idea what the old man living in the fortress looked like, they could have just kidnapped the real one and put some other old guy there to say, "Oh, good work. I've received the

letter." They could have gotten the letter so easily that way. Or maybe they were planning to take our lives as payback for being trashed in the previous ambush.

As I was pondering all this, we arrived in front of the fortress. The massive main gate wouldn't budge due to being locked and covered in thick red rust. We'd have to enter through a side door a little further away. That part was exactly the same as when we came five days ago... The difference was that this time, the enemy was inside.

If they were at the same level as before, I wouldn't have to think much and could just waltz in. But they'd probably evaluated my strength to some extent after being beaten so easily. The fact that they wrote "five days later" in the note was the key. They likely needed that time to gather their forces. That meant I couldn't afford to be careless.

I checked for any presence from outside the door. I could definitely sense something, but I couldn't tell exactly what. The two behind me were whispering. "...What's wrong, Lina? Suddenly standing still in front of the door..."

"As I thought... no matter what she says, she must be scared... no matter how tough she acts, looking at her chest, she's still just a child..."

Bonk.

"...If you weren't my client, I'd be hitting you right now..."

"You did hit me! Just now! Quite hard!"

"Be quiet. Here I go!" I said, opening the door. Standing right in front of me was a single suit of plate mail.

"Waaaaah?!" "Gyaaaaah!" "Hyaaaaah!" I screamed and jumped back. The other two screamed as well. I definitely hadn't sensed any presence right behind the door, so if it was actually there—it meant they were skilled enough to hide their presence.

However, the armor showed no sign of attacking; it silently pointed toward the back. Go that way—it seemed to be saying. Fine. Let's go.

"Lemmy, Cranbe, stay close and follow me." I said, stepping into the building while staying alert. The entryway led to a small room with another door on the opposite side leading further in. As far as I could see, the only person in the room was the one at the entrance.

"The hostage is really here, right?" I called out to the armored figure as we passed. But it didn't even try to respond, just kept pointing toward the back.

"If you have a mouth, why don't you answer? It's not like it'll cost you anything." Still no response. But—at that moment, I felt a strange sense of dissonance. This armor was certainly the same as the ones worn by the group that attacked us before. However, the atmosphere it gave off was completely different. How should I put it—even though it was right in front of me, there was almost no presence. Killing one's presence in this situation seemed pointless... Wait, could it be—Living Armor?! A type of guard often used by sorcerers, made by having a low-level spirit possess armor. Which meant there was a sorcerer among the enemy.

"Hmm..." I nodded to myself and proceeded in the direction it pointed, staying wary of the "armor's" movements. Beyond the door was a long, dimly lit corridor. Doors were lined up on both sides at regular intervals. Based on the direction the "armor" had pointed, I was supposed to go to the end of the corridor, but I couldn't just walk straight ahead like an idiot. If the enemy were hiding behind those doors, we'd be caught in a pincer attack.

So, I checked inside each door as we went, which was a huge pain. I'll spare you the details of each room, but in the end, there was no sign of the enemy in any of them. Then, at the end of the corridor. "We have been expecting you, everyone." An emotionless voice greeted us.

The man had a strange aura about him. It was a fairly large room. A single "light" with low brightness hung from the ceiling, creating a gloomy contrast. Filling the back half of the room were "armors." From their presence, these also seemed to be Living Armor. And in the middle of them stood a single man. He was dressed as a sorcerer in a black cloak. His face was white as a mask, and completely expressionless. Or perhaps he really was wearing a sophisticated mask. The man spoke again.

"I truly appreciate you coming in response to my blunt summons. My name is Gaul. I look forward to our acquaintance..." *Great*...

I let out an internal sigh. He sounded like a waiter at a restaurant, but when people in this world introduce themselves to an opponent—it usually means one of two things. One: they're famous enough that their name can be used as a threat. Two: they have no intention of letting their opponent leave alive. No need to say which one this was. Of course, I hadn't expected things to end peacefully, but to have his intentions shown so clearly...

"So? Where's the hostage?" I said, standing between Lemmy and Cranbe.

"I am terribly sorry, but please hand over the letter first."

"I'll say it again. Where's the hostage?"

"It will take some time to verify the letter. Once it is confirmed as genuine, I will return the hostage to you." .....

"Can I ask one thing, Mr. Gaul?"

"What would that be?"

"Do you actually intend to negotiate?"

"You know the meaning of the word 'parallel', don't you?" The sorcerer Gaul said flatly, his expression still unchanged.

"I think I do." I nodded slightly. "In this case—it's a declaration of war, right?"

"Quite right." The moment the sorcerer replied—bloodlust flared up right behind me.

Spreading my arms, I shoved Lemmy and Cranbe to the sides and dashed toward Gaul. I felt a sensation through my cloak against my back. A sword had just swung through the spot where I'd been standing a second ago. If I'd been late in dashing or had turned around on the spot, more than just my cloak would have been sliced.

I turned around after putting enough distance between us. A single beastman stood there, sword drawn. Where had he been hiding?

"A cat-man?!"

"I'm a leopard! A black leopard!" At my words, the beastman momentarily forgot about attacking Lemmy and the others and shouted in protest. In that opening, the two of them had fled to the corners of the room—but I couldn't protect both of them this way. Anyway, I had to divert the enemy's attention somehow—

"Black cat or black leopard, there's not much difference. Your appearance doesn't change much."

"It's different! It's fundamentally different!"

"Zector. That's enough." The voice came from right behind me. When did he get so close?!

I hurriedly dashed again and ran to Lemmy's side. *Clatter. Clink. Clang. Snap*. With metallic sounds, the group of "armors" began to slowly advance. This effectively separated the two of us from Cranbe.

"Princess!"

"Old man! Don't hesitate to pass on peacefully! I'll take the condolence money for you!"

"....." A person’s true self really does come out in an emergency like this. But I couldn't just abandon the old guy.

"Flare Arrow!" With a single spell, over a dozen arrows of fire appeared in front of me. If those "armors" were Living Armor, it would be almost useless, but my target was the sorcerer himself. If I could just take him down, the Living Armor would lose their commander and be nothing to fear. It’d be even better if I could take out the beastman too.

"Go!" At that moment, the beastman moved. Right into the middle of the Flare Arrows!

Whoosh! The fire tore through the air and scattered. As I thought, they were Living Armor. The plate mail didn't seem to have taken any damage. And Gaul was still fine. An instant before the Flare Arrows hit, the beastman had stood in front of him, using his own body as a shield to protect the sorcerer.

"My word..." Cranbe let out a voice of admiration. "To throw away his own life to protect his comrade..."

However— "Hmph. Don't be ridiculous. Who would do such a thing?" The beastman Zector himself spoke in a perfectly normal voice.

"No way?!" This time I was the one who shouted. Just now, the beastman had definitely been hit directly by several Flare Arrows. Normally, even if he were wearing some armor, there’s no way he’d be unhurt.

"I have a bit of a peculiar constitution." He said, curling the corner of his mouth into a smirk. "Spells of this level don't work on me." *Peculiar constitution... give me a break.*

—Wait, could it be?! "Are you—a chimera with a low-level demon?!"

"I'll leave that to your imagination." Judging by his expression, I wasn't far off.

"Gaul! Use your toys to push them all at once!"

"It's hurtful to call them 'toys'. Well, I don't mind, though." The sorcerer replied without expression and waved his right hand. The Living Armor quickened their pace. At this rate, Cranbe would—

If the ceiling were higher, I could have used Raywing to fly over the enemy's heads with Lemmy and get to Cranbe, but... I started running toward Cranbe while chanting a spell. Lemmy followed closely behind me.

"Naïve!" Zector the beastman stood in my way.

"Blue Blast!" I unleashed the spell. Not at Zector, but at Gaul the sorcerer!

"Crap!" Zector blurted out. The shockwave of blue light I released blew away the Living Armor and hit the sorcerer directly!

Crash! Gaul was slammed into the wall, crushed by the Living Armor. His head tilted back powerlessly—and then it suddenly fell off and rolled away!

"Eek!" Lemmy let out a small scream. *Thud...* It fell to the floor, making a dry, light sound. ...Eh?

"...A doll?!" Yes. The sorcerer's head rolling on the floor was skillfully made, but it was undoubtedly just a doll's head.

"Tch... you saw through it..." Zector spat out, sounding annoyed. This guy... he'd used himself as a shield just to hide the fact that the doll was just a prop... He was quite the actor.

But if that was the case, where was the real sorcerer?! It was unlikely to be a one-man show by the beastman. Moving a doll with magic, having it speak, and giving orders to Living Armor all at the same time—no matter how good a caster was, it required significant concentration. To maintain such precise control, he had to be close by... I see! Could it be?!

"We're running, Lemmy!" I shouted on purpose.

"But..."

"Just do it! We'll all be taken down at this rate! I'll definitely come back for Cranbe later!"

"Heartless! Demon! Flat-chest!" Ignoring the old man's shouting behind me, I grabbed her hand and ran back into the long corridor.

"You're not getting away!" Zector the beastman gave chase. I also started chanting while running through the long corridor. However, because Lemmy kept looking back, our pace wouldn't pick up. ...Look, this is just a plan, and I have no intention of abandoning the old guy either. I wanted to explain it so she'd understand, but there was no time.

—Geez! Fine! I pulled a gold coin from my pocket and threw it toward the end of the corridor. *Clink*...

"Ah! That sound... a gold coin!" Her expression suddenly sharpened, and she dashed toward the sound. ...She's so easy to control...

Anyway, she was taken care of. Now for— "Flare Lance!" I fired the spell as I turned around! Given the width of the corridor, dodging it would be nearly impossible. Furthermore, this was a spell that attacked the target’s spirit. No matter who Zector was, he wouldn't be unscathed if he took it head-on.

"Whoa?!" The beastman shouted and jumped high. And then—he actually stuck to the ceiling. He was quite nimble. He probably hid his presence and stuck to the ceiling like this to let us pass when we were checking the rooms. Anyway, while I didn't take him down, I’d at least gained some distance. I started chanting again while running.

I grabbed Lemmy by the scruff of her neck as she was nuzzling the gold coin she’d picked up, and we finally made it out of the long corridor. That small room we first entered. A single suit of armor was standing quietly in the corner of the room. —As I thought!

"Vibration Blast!" "D—Dammit...!" My spell pierced through the armor! Along with Gaul’s true body inside. He’d been hiding his presence, pretending to be an "armor" like the one that had guided us, and was leisurely controlling the dolls from here. I’d realized that, and pretended to run away while leaving Cranbe behind just to launch an attack on his main body. Besides, I couldn't let the enemy keep that letter.

With this, the Living Armor in the other room would be nothing but puppets. All that was left was to take down the beastman and rescue Cranbe! If possible, I wanted to capture Zector alive and ask about the hostage, but he wasn't someone I could hold back against.

"Tch!" Seeing that the sorcerer had been taken down, Zector turned tail and headed back toward the other room.

"Lemmy, stay here!" Leaving her with that, I chased after the beastman. When I reached the room, Zector was picking up the unconscious Cranbe and heading out through another door.

"You're not getting away!" I hurriedly gave chase. However, since he was carrying Cranbe, I couldn't use magic carelessly. I didn't think Sleep would work on him either. We ran through the corridor and turned a corner—and I saw Zector leaning out of a window!

"We'll meet again." He said, then leaped out!

"Dammit!" I looked out the window and saw the beastman heading straight into the forest. I jumped out the window too and chased after him. But... By the time I entered the forest, Zector and Cranbe had already vanished beyond the trees. ...A total defeat... A bitter feeling of loss filled my heart...

However—the incident took an odd turn after this.

"Are you planning to run away with your tail between your legs?" A familiar voice suddenly called out when Lemmy and I were passing through the forest. It was the day after the battle at the fortress. Having run out of options (or so I thought), we'd talked it over through the night and decided to at least report back to Duke McGarrell, so we were trudging back toward Figaro City...

Zector the beastman emerged from the bushes in front of us. Followed by more plate mail. It seemed today's armor actually had people inside. And to our surprise—one of the armored men was firmly holding onto Cranbe.

"Isn't it a bit heartless to abandon him and run away, even if he doesn't have much time left? Eh?" Zector said in a mocking tone. But—why?!

"Anyway, I'll get that letter even if I have to kill you." Lemmy and I exchanged glances. The captured Cranbe also had a puzzled expression. Could it be—an idea suddenly flashed in my head.

"Listen, don't resist... if you resist, this old man's—"

"Blast Bomb!" With Lemmy and me at the center, the ground in a doughnut-shaped area erupted toward the sky!

"Whoa?!" Zector hurriedly backed away. "Tch! You really don't listen, do you!" Without even waiting for the spray of dirt to settle, he held a black buster sword horizontally in one hand and gathered his "ki."

Whoosh! With a shout, he swung his sword! The shockwave of ki or magic emitted from the blade sliced through the pillars of dirt from the Blast Bomb at about waist height!

"Hmph! Did you think a spell like that would work as a shield! Idiot!" Zector gloated. But... When the dust finally settled, of course, we weren't there.

"What?!" Zector hurriedly looked around.

"Above you!" By the time someone shouted, it was too late.

Thud! I'd performed a dive-bombing tackle on the man holding Cranbe. Soldier A fell over helplessly. I didn't think Zector had a trick like that, but I hadn't used that Blast Bomb as a shield or an attack; it was a smokescreen. I'd used it to hide from the enemy's eyes, then used Raywing while holding Lemmy to fly up through the pillars of dirt and dove back down, aiming for the one holding Cranbe.

"Ouch, ouch, ouch..." Cranbe seemed to have hit his hip a bit, but he appeared to be safe. As soon as I landed, I kicked Soldier A in the head as he was trying to get up!

Crack! It was through his helmet, but it still seemed quite effective, as he clutched his head and started twitching. In that time, I moved back with Lemmy and Cranbe to put enough distance between us and them.

"How dare you!" "I'll kill you!" "Hey! Get out of the way! You're in my path!" Without thinking about their own skills, the armored men rushed us. Zector couldn't get close because they were in his way. This match is mine!

"Burst Rondo!" Light gathered at the men's feet. And then—

BOOM! A massive explosion erupted! Once the echoes and dust cleared, only the armored men were left lying in heaps. Zector must have narrowly escaped. He was no longer anywhere to be seen.

"Phew... we managed to pull through somehow..." I let out a sigh of relief.

"But old man... I'm glad you're safe..."

"...Princess, what's with that disappointed look on your face...?"

"But... I'm surprised they didn't find it..."

"They probably never dreamed I'd be the one carrying it. I wasn't even searched." As he spoke, Cranbe pulled a paper-wrapped package from his tunic. It was Duke McGarrell's letter. If I'd had it, I might have dropped it during the fight, and if Lemmy had it and the enemy found out, she'd have been targeted. That would have been bad, so I'd had Cranbe carry it, but...

"Well, it's awkward to say it myself, but unlike the Princess, I have a certain amount of virtue."

"Unlike who, exactly?"

"Ack! No, I mean!"

"...Well, anyway, we were lucky."

"Actually... that might not be the case..." I threw cold water on Lemmy, who was simply happy.

"...Eh? What do you mean, Lina?"

"I'll explain the details soon, but before that, for now... try taking off the helmets of the guys lying around here, one by one."

"...The helmets, you say...?"

"I know! We're going to sell them to a junk shop!"

"We're not! Just please do it."

"Understood... geez... taking things from fallen people... it's just like something the Princess would do..."

"Old man... I can hear you..."

"I didn't say anything!" Muttering to themselves, the two of them started taking off the men's helmets.

"...Huh?" Lemmy spoke up.

"What is it, Princess?" The two of them gathered near her.

"Look at this man. Doesn't he look familiar?" She pointed to the man lying on the ground while holding the helmet she'd removed in her right hand.

"Hmm... now that you mention it...?" Cranbe tilted his head. Sturdy build, square jaw, and short-cropped hair.

"It's Barrel." I answered.

"Barrel...? Hmm, who was that again...?" Good, good. Then the next thing to confirm is...

"Lemmy, Cranbe. We're going back to that village near the lake. I'll explain the details as we go."

"Oh, you're safe, Lady Lemmy! ...Well, I heard rumors of some trouble over there. I was worried." Duke McGarrell said with a pleasant smile as he greeted us. We were in the castle's audience chamber. A red carpet, guards lined up on both sides. These kinds of places usually have this kind of design. Of course, this place was no exception.

"Oh, stop it. You're quite the prankster, Duke McGarrell." I said with a smirk. Lemmy and Cranbe, standing beside me, kept their heads down in silence.

"A prankster... what do you mean...?"

"Don't play dumb. It's about the letter I was carrying."

"A—Ah, that... yes..." His smile twitched. "I... I apologize for not saying anything. I was planning to have someone else deliver it, but things happened on this end too..."

"With all due respect, that's not what I'm talking about." I stood up slowly. Duke McGarrell showed signs of agitation.

"Not... that... then...?"

"I’m talking about you hiring us to deliver a letter that had no recipient."

"Wh—"

"When we asked at the village near the lake, they told us no one lives in that fortress. Sending a letter to someone who doesn't exist—it’s quite a joke. Why would assassins attack us for a letter that’s supposed to be meaningless?"

"H—How should I know...!" Duke McGarrell avoided my gaze, looking flustered. I continued, staring him straight in the eye.

"Furthermore, the assassins claimed to have taken an old man hostage who didn't exist in the first place, and tried to negotiate for the letter. It was almost as if they wanted the negotiations to fail. At one point, they even caught Cranbe while he had the letter but didn't even bother to search him before making a pointless 'hand over the letter' demand. Why? Perhaps the goal wasn't the letter, but to make it look like they were after it while their true aim was to eliminate us? If that were the case, who were they after? It obviously wasn't Cranbe, who was captured and then released unharmed. They weren't after me either. So— Cranbe. If anything were to happen to Lady Lemmy, who would inherit the Tradia territory?"

"Lady Lemmy has no siblings." Cranbe said in a clear voice, still looking down. "And with Master Flaon’s whereabouts unknown, if anything should happen to her—" The old man looked up and stared Duke McGarrell down. Just like I’d practiced with him. "The right of succession would likely fall to one of your sons, Duke McGarrell, as relatives."

Rustle... The guards suddenly started whispering.

"S—Silence!" Duke McGarrell’s face turned bright red as he stood up from his chair. "How unpleasant! If I listen to you, it’s as if you’re saying I planned Lady Lemmy’s assassination just to give the territory to my children!"

"Not 'as if', that’s exactly what I'm saying." I pointed directly at Duke McGarrell. "The assassins wore full helmets to hide their faces and voices from us. It’d be bad if we recognized someone we met here among the assassins, after all."

"Silence!"

"You probably chose the most problematic of your own soldiers at first... but they were easily beaten back. So then you hired professionals. A sorcerer and a beastman. —But using your own soldiers was a mistake. Among the assassins I took down was that man—Captain Barrel, the one with the terrible attitude. He was your soldier, wasn't he?"

"Barrel was?!" "But... come to think of it, I haven't seen him in a while..." The guards became even more agitated.

"Silence! Be quiet!" McGarrell, having completely lost his cool, started shouting. "You say whatever you want! How insolent! Guards! Throw these people into the dungeon!"

However, the guards, confused by my words, didn't move immediately.

"What are you doing! Throw them in already!" The guards finally started moving when told a second time. They approached us with uncertain expressions.

"Be quiet!" A dignified voice echoed. Lemmy, who had been silent until now, stood up and looked down at the guards. The soldiers froze.

"Open your eyes! Do you call a man who uses treachery, consorts with villains, and plots to eliminate others to steal their territory your master?! If a knight's pride lies in justice, then you must know that correcting your master's mistakes is also a knight's duty!"

The soldiers were completely silent. Now, here's a question. Between a scruffy middle-aged man who is panicking and saying nonsense, and a beautiful girl who is speaking with dignity about a "knight's pride" (even if she was just following my acting instructions)—who would they trust, emotionally speaking?

But the world isn't so simple that the soldiers would suddenly realize the truth and drop their weapons in tears. I'm sure some calculation was going on in their heads. If they sided with Lemmy, it would certainly be the right thing to do, but Duke McGarrell would be judged by the Grand King, and his territory would likely be confiscated. That would mean they and their families would end up on the streets. But if they followed Duke McGarrell's orders, their pride and justice would be lost, but their livelihoods would be secure—or so they thought.

To make sure the guards didn't choose the latter, Lemmy delivered the final blow. "Duke McGarrell. It is useless to capture us now. I have already sent a letter to Grand King Raltigue, along with a witness. If you surrender and accept your judgment, he may show mercy toward your sons and your soldiers."

With this, even the soldiers' calculations were on our side. Of course, the letter was a lie. If I'd actually sent something like that and it fell into McGarrell's hands, the tables would have been turned. In cases like this, it's all about the bluff.

"E—Eh! How insolent! ...Guards! What are you doing! Seize them!" But even when he shouted, there was no way the soldiers would move in this situation. Only cold stares were returned to him.

"You...!" With a small groan, he turned tail and ran out of the audience chamber.

"Don't let him get away!" I shouted and chased after him. Lemmy, Cranbe, and the guards followed along with the momentum. We ran through the corridor and out into the courtyard. *Rustle*. The bushes shook, and a black shadow appeared in front of him. Zector the beastman!

"So that's where you were!" McGarrell shouted. "What are you going to do! Your plan..."

"I heard about the situation, Lord McGarrell." The beastman said, cutting him off. ...Eh?

"I see! Then it’s simple! Kill them! Finish this yourself! Cut down every last one of them!"

Zector the beastman drew his sword in silence. "Stand back." I said, stepping forward. I whispered a spell in my mouth. And then—Zector moved!

Squelch! He turned and swung his sword, cutting McGarrell down with a single stroke! We were stunned.

"...What's the meaning of this..."

"Well... he wouldn't be able to pay me anyway. So..." He said calmly, sheathing his sword. "I just took his life instead of the money and Gaul's funeral expenses... He realized he couldn't escape and committed suicide out of remorse for what he’d done... I don't think that’s a bad scenario for you either."

"I guess... but..." I said with a sour face. Something was bothering me. "I don't like the way you do things."

"Give me a break. I have a policy of not fighting for free." As he spoke, Zector slowly backed away. "You're not nice enough to risk your life for nothing, are you?"

"I—I take down anyone I don't like. That’s all."

"Hmph... now that you mention it, I haven't heard your name yet."

"I’m Lina. Lina Inverse."

"I'll remember that—we might meet again—" As soon as he said that, Zector turned, dashed across the courtyard, and jumped over the wall. At that moment, an idea flashed in my head.

"Raywing!" I cast the flying spell and chased after the beastman. Once I was sure we were in a place away from town where no one was around, I circled ahead and stood in his path.

"...Why did you bother chasing me?" The beastman asked, closing the distance while reaching for his sword hilt.

"There was something I wanted to check..." I said, keeping my distance. "McGarrell said, 'your plan'. Which means you were already there when we first arrived at the castle. I thought you were just an assassin he hired... but that doesn't seem to be the case..."

The beastman laughed at my words. "Oh... then who am I, exactly?"

"Your name when you were human... by any chance, is it Flaon?"

"...I see..." The beastman's entire body started to shake. Transformation! His fur rapidly thinned, and his silhouette distorted. After a while—a man stood before me. Black hair. A handsome face and a well-proportioned build.

"...Did you hear it from Lemmy... or maybe Cranbe?" Flaon said in a quiet voice. His throat must have changed too, as even his voice was different. "Still, you figured out my true identity well."

"Just a hunch. I had a feeling. For a mere mercenary, your influence over McGarrell was too great, and just because he couldn't pay you isn't enough of a reason to kill him... McGarrell was probably the only one who knew your real name. That's why you killed him—which means you haven't given up on your revenge against Tradia for kicking you out."

"...You wouldn't understand... the unbearable feeling of being looked down upon for something you had no part in... if they had just said it to my face, there might have been a chance to clear up the misunderstanding...

I left the castle and continued my aimless journey. The desire for revenge against those who drove me out sprouted and grew, but I didn't have the power... Then one day, I met a man. He gave me this power to beastify. And he told me to take advantage of McGarrell's ambition."

"...Who is this guy who's such a pain in the neck...?"

"I can't tell you... and you wouldn't know him even if I did. ...Anyway, now we have a perfectly good reason to kill each other."

"Now that I know, I can't just let you go..."

"Now that you know, I can't let you live..." Flaon drew his sword as he spoke. And then—the battle began.

"Lina!" Lemmy greeted me with a worried face.

"My, my, you went off after that beastman and didn't come back for so long, we thought for sure you'd kicked the bucket." This was Cranbe.

"I took care of it." I said with a smile. It was a bit of a stiff smile, but that couldn't be helped.

In the end, thanks to Lemmy's suggestion, the McGarrell territory was spared from being abolished. The eldest son would inherit the territory, and things seemed to have settled down. The fact that Zector was Flaon remains a secret only I know. It would

be too cruel to tell Lemmy, and I feel like Cranbe would just let it slip if I told him. It’s better they don't know.

With most problems solved, one remained. I let out a deep sigh while watching the bright campfire. Of course, we were camping out tonight.

"Come on, Lina, don't stop your hands." At Lemmy’s words, I let out another deep sigh, took a leafless rose from the box, and started wrapping a leaf onto it with tape.

"Since the loan fell through, if we don't make some money by making these roses, I won't be able to pay your fee. Consider this part of the job and make them well."

"I told you... I don't need the fee anymore..."

"No! If I did something like not paying you, it would bring shame to the name of Tradia!"

...And so, until we reached Tradia, I was forced to help make artificial flowers for what felt like forever. *Sniffle, sniffle...*

(Little Princess 2: End)

Afterword

Author: Sorry to keep you all waiting! I now present to you *Slayers Special* Volume 2: *Little Princess*!

L: Man, we finally made it out in one piece, didn't we?

Author: It’s not "timely" at all, but to all the readers out there: Happy New Year. Oh, by the way, this year's 1992 New Year's card featured a "Little Brat" version of Lady L, drawn by yours truly (the overconfident author) and printed via Print Gocco.

L: A... "Little brat"...? Couldn't you say "In her youth" or something...? Anyway, just so there’s no misunderstanding, my current version is a refined and graceful beauty, okay?

Author: Who’s gonna believe that? You're a slapstick comedy broad.

L: SHUT IT!

Author: ...Anyway, moving on, let’s get to the main point.

L: Here we go! First, let’s start with my commentary on the work!

Author: Forget it. We don't need to do that.

L: WHAAAT! Come forth! Assistant S!

S: At your command!

Author: Wa—Wait a second! There’s something else we have to do besides a commentary!

L: Oh... right. ...Hmph... You lucked out, Author.

Author: "Lucked out," he says... Well, anyway... *Ahem*... To all the *Slayers* fans nationwide! Sorry to keep you waiting! We are now announcing: The Shining 1st Slayers Character Popularity Poll! (I'd be happy if you could imagine a fanfare playing right now.)

L: But listen... don't you think just announcing them in order from the top ten is a bit lacking in excitement?

Author: Hmm... then what do you suggest?

L: Well...

S: Oh! How about this? Since the points were tallied in three separate batches, why don't we report the results of each stage like a play-by-play sports broadcast?

L: Oh! That's a good idea, coming from S!

S: ...What do you mean, "coming from S"...?

Author: All right! The time has finally come for the 1st Character Popularity Poll! Will your favorite character make the cut?! What will the results be?! Your host is the author, Hajime Kanzaka.

L: And the commentator—at the risk of sounding repetitive—is the blonde beauty, the absolutely invincible me, L.

S: And I, Assistant S, will be providing the play-by-play!

L: So, what do you think? Any predictions for the results?

Author: Well... I expect Lina to be a lock for the top spot. The real question is the battle for second place and below; it'll likely be a close race between Gourry and Naga.

L: But there’s also a character named Zelgadiss, you know. ...And what about me?

Author: Dead last.

(Sound of hitting and slapping)

Author: ...We apologize for the disturbance in the broadcast... Styptic pencil, get me a styptic pencil...

S: Now then... the 1st Slayers Character Popularity Poll... the fan letters arrive from the editorial department to the author in envelopes. The author... opens the envelope! It’s open! The early stage has begun! Looking over the batch, there are quite a lot of "single-push" votes for Amelia! And the tally begins! Lina and Gourry are steadily gaining points! Wait?! Naga’s points aren't growing as fast as expected! OH! And the Author just got a point!!

L: You’re considered a "character" too?

Author: ...Well... I do show up in the afterwords from time to time...

S: Is the vote for the Author valid or invalid?! But either way, the points are minuscule! Frankly, he's out of the question! He’s below Nunsa! The Author is lower than a fish!

Author: ...Shut up.

S: Holding a commanding lead in first place is Lina, as most expected! Following her is Gourry, and... OH! Third place, by a margin of only one point, is Lady L, beating out Zelgadiss in fourth!

L: Ho-ho-ho!

S: Moving on... Ah! It’s Amelia! Also by a narrow margin, the newcomer Amelia has overtaken Naga for fifth place! Those "five-point-per-postcard" votes are really paying

off! Trailing behind expectations, Naga is in sixth in the early stage! Further back, Phil-san, then me, Assistant S, followed by Ellis, Nunsa, the Big Sister from back home, and others are all bunched up together!

L: Wow, Naga being in sixth is a surprise.

Author: Now, the tally enters the mid-game!

S: Lina and Gourry remain unchanged, steadily racking up points! Wait! Suddenly, Zelgadiss is making a sprint! He's got strong support from female voters! He easily passes Lady L and is chasing Gourry in second!

L: Hyooooo... (whimpering)

S: Zel is strong! Zel is strong! He's finally about to catch Gourry in second... huh?

L: Hm? What's wrong, Assistant S?

Author: Did something happen...?

S: OH! Fraud has been detected! We found postcards where one person sent one under their real name and two anonymously, all for Zel! That's fifteen points disqualified!

Author: Hmm... I understand wanting to push your favorite character, but...

L: Even so, how did you catch that?

S: Even with the loss, the female "push" for Zel remains powerful! While he can't quite reach Gourry, has he solidified his position in third? Fourth is Lady L, and... here Naga has overtaken Amelia! Quite a ways behind Amelia is Phil-san, and then me, Assistant S! Followed by Ellis and the Author!

L: All right! We've finally reached the final stage of the tally!

S: Everyone is growing their vote counts smoothly! Wait! Another ranking swap!

L: *Doki-doki* (Heart pounding)

S: And! It’s finally out! The final results!

Author: Well... it’s finally time for the results... but since the winner is so obvious, announcing from the bottom up would be... Forget it! Let's break tradition and announce from 1st place!

Author: 1st place, as expected, the Empress of Destruction, the "Dragon's Bane" Lina Inverse, with approximately 236 points!

L: ...What’s with the "approximately"?

Author: It means "rounded down to the nearest whole number."

S: This time, we invalidated points with two decimal places or negative points. Otherwise, Amelia would have ended up with about 200 million points.

L: The real interest is second place and below. *Excited*

Author: 2nd place is Gourry Gabriev with 226 points! Zel-kun couldn't pull off the upset! **3rd place** is Zelgadiss, with 161 points! **4th place** is the self-proclaimed eternal rival of Lina, Naga the White Serpent! 106 points!

L: ...Wait, what...?

Author: 5th place is the suddenly popular princess, Amelia! 102 points!

L: ...Excuse me...

Author: And in **6th place**! Dropping in the final tally, L, with 92 points!

(L stands there in stunned silence, while Assistant S desperately tries to hold back laughter in the background)

Author: 7th place with 40 points is the Charming Prince, His Highness Philionel! **8th place** is, if I may be so bold, myself, the Author. **9th place** is Assistant S. And **10th place** is Elisiel.

(L is still in shock)

Author: Below that: 11th is the Big Sister from back home (who didn't grow as much as expected), 12th is Nunsa, tied for 13th are Sylphiel and "The Thousand Pseudonyms." Tied for 15th are Meena and Kanzel. Tied for 17th are Canie and Rezo. And in 19th place, we have Zuma, Reimia, Lanz, and Rahanim. By the way, the vote count for 19th place was 5 points.

S: Man, Lina and Gourry were consistent, but Zel's "single-push" votes really stood out. If we had used negative points, Zelgadiss and Gourry might have swapped places. There were quite a few Zel fans whose comments were like, "I can't stand Gourry!"

Author: And L would probably have racked up a lot of negative votes. She has her fans, but she seems to have plenty of anti-fans too.

S: I see. I'm looking forward to the next one!

Author: Wait a minute! I didn't say we're doing a "next time"!

S: What? You aren't?

Author: Well... if I feel like it, I might, but I'll announce it in an afterword when the time comes.

S: And so, that concludes our three-hour broadcast (liar), the "1991 Shining 1st Slayers Character Popularity Poll."

Author: We'll leave it at that. Goodbye!

(Afterword: End)